Take Me Home by Booklover1217

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Summary:

She had always heard the voice in her heard, ever since she was a young girl locked away in a lab by monsters. The voice of her soulmate, the boy who had kept her sane and alive when she would've given up hope. The boy she had been blocking for years.

El Hopper, once only known by the number Eleven, has been hiding from her past for almost a year, a year where she has lived as nothing more than a lifeless zombie. Now, someone has come back into her life asking for her help, and she can't refuse. Will she find her missing friend? And, in the process, will she find the very person who will help her come back to life?

1. Chapter 1

Author's Note:

> Hey everyone! Oh my god, I'm so glad to be back! In light of the release of the amazing trailer today, I thought I would post the first chapter of my new story. The first three chapters are a bit angsty, but I promise heaps and heaps of fluff later on ;)
> Hope you enjoy!!!
> Oh, and this is dedicated to the amazing Jane! Thank you so much for all the encouragement and laughs you have given me while I've been struggling and feelings down while writing this story. You're such an amazing friend and I don't know what I would've done without you!

Fifteen year old Eleven sat on the edge of her bed, her long legs dangling as she stared at the locked door in front of her, waiting for the inevitable, for him to arrive, her heart racing so fast she felt sick.

The nausea was only made worse by the dread that seemed to coat her insides, leaving her entire body icy cold.

It was time, she thought, her fingers clutching the thin material of the hospital gown that was the only clothing she owned. She had to do it tonight. It was her chance, maybe the only one she would get.

She heard a loud click and every muscle stiffened as the door swung open, revealing a man in a immaculate black suit, his white hair perfectly flat on his head and his face stern as he studied her shrewdly, eyes cold and carefully blank.

Eleven schooled her face into the blank mask she had used for years to hide her thoughts from this man, the man who had kept her prisoner for six years.

Dr. Martin Brenner, the director of the so-called Department of Energy, the front of the evil doings of those who had experimented on her and so many others like her. Children with abilities who they

had stolen from their parents, taking away their names and leaving them with nothing but a number to claim. Taking them for the sole purpose of forging them into weapons, an army of gifted soldiers to be used for their every whim.

Eleven studied him silently, keeping her face purposely blank, eyes empty of emotion.

Her Papa. The man who had been her trainer, her captor and the man who had hurt her over and over all these years. She had so many scars, inside and out, from the punishments she had endured from him. She could no longer stand to be in a small room without panic choking her, a side effect of all the times he'd locked her in a metal closet as punishment for not doing what he wanted. Her arms were covered in scars from the hundreds of time they'd injected with her with the strange chemicals that blocked her mind and powers, stopping her from using them against them until they needed it.

Brenner nodded at her, a smile that didn't reach his eyes twitching his lips.

'Come, Eleven'.

Eleven nodded, swallowing hard and rose to her feet, walking out of the room that had been her home for six years and into the hall, not even looking back, even though she knew it would be the last time she'd ever see it.

One last time, she thought as she began to follow him down the hall. She just had to play the part one more time and it'd be over, one way or another.

She walked down the cold and sterile halls in silence, staring at his back and trying not to look at the four guards that surrounded her, keeping Brenner safe. They passed rows and rows of doors that held children and teenagers who looked out at her through the small window in their doors, their eyes wide, some afraid and others empty and broken, no fight left in them.

Relief flooded her as she felt a click in her mind, the link that had formed there almost three years ago coming to life. The link that

allowed Him to enter her mind. It opened fully as the remaining drugs faded from her system, and her mind instantly reached for his, needing him to help her through this, as he had helped her survive all the horror, fear and pain that the Bad Men had put her through since they'd first spoken.

They hadn't given her the blockers today, needing her to be at full power for the experiment and she had never been more grateful for their greediness, their lust for power as she felt her mind brush against his own.

Are you there? I...need you.

There was silence until his familiar voice settled into her mind, so soft and gentle, tears prickled her eyes. She blinked them back quickly, holding the blank mask she had perfected over the years firmly in place.

He was here. She wouldn't have to do this alone. She wouldn't have to do it without saying goodbye.

What's the matter? Are you okay?

Eleven bit her lip hard, the salty taste of blood filling her mouth as she swallowed back a cry, struggling not to weep at the thought of what she was about to do, how much she was going to hurt him.

I'm...I'm fine. I just can't do this alone.

He was silent for so long Eleven was worried the link between them had snapped shut again, panic filling her. Not now...she needed to tell him, she needed him to understand...

What are you doing? he said suddenly, tone nervous, a slippery edge of fear coating it.

Eleven had to fight to keep walking, to keep from curling up on the floor and crying.

It wasn't fair. She didn't want to do this, she didn't want to leave or hurt him. But she had no choice. She had to stop it.

Please understand. I have to do this.

Do what? What's going on?

I can't tell you. If they ever find I can talk to you, if they think you know anything about them, they'll hurt you. I can't let that happen.

Who? Who are they?

Her heart stopped in her chest, fear racing through her veins as she silently cursed herself. She had to be more careful, she was letting too much slip.

She shook her head so minutely that the guards surrounding them didn't notice the movement, all straightening to attention as they neared the hall, eyes darkening with eagerness for what was about to happen.

If only they knew, she thought, reaching out for him again frantically, knowing she was running out of time.

It doesn't matter. Just let it go, please.

I don't care if they find me, if they hurt me. I just want you to be okay. Promise me that you'll be okay. That you won't get hurt.

Eleven hesitated, biting her lip. She couldn't tell him the truth, but she'd never lied to him before. She had kept things from him, not telling him where she was and who the Bad Men were, the reason why she was so afraid all the time, but she had never straight out lied.

But she had to now, she realised, feeling a pang of wrongness deep inside her, protesting the very thought. She had to protect him. It was the only thing that mattered now.

I promise.

She walked out into the main hall, keeping her expression blank and on the floor in front of her, ignoring the stares of all the
people within the room, though she couldn't ignore the way their eyes seemed to dig into her.

She listened quietly as Brenner discussed the experiment with the scientists who had designed it, her nails digging through her gown into the flesh of her thigh as they explained what they wanted her to do.

They planned to send her back into the parallel universe they had forced her into when she was eleven years old in order to find another creature for them to capture. Another monster for them to use for their monstrous plan, a plan they didn't know she knew about it.

But they would find out soon, she thought as she glanced at the creature they kept chained to the wall behind her, her entire body going cold as it lifted its head and seemed to look back at her. As if it knew what she was about to do.

'Understand, Eleven', Brenner said sharply, noticing her distraction.

Eleven jerked her attention back to him, lifting her eyes to his and nodding robotically.

'Yes, Papa,' she said, voice flat and devoid of all emotion as she gave him the answer she knew he wanted.

His cold eyes studied her face for a long moment, expression shifting to one she couldn't decipher. Her heart began to race, paranoia filling her, suddenly feeling like he could read her every thought and would stop her before she could carry out her plan. Before she could stop them.

But he nodded after a minute, stiff face relaxing slightly, and she let out a breath she hadn't known she was holding, drawing much needed air into her burning lungs.

'Good, he said shortly, turning away and dismissing her, letting her fade into the background until he needed her again.

Eleven had known for a long time that she was nothing but a pawn to him, a tool to use when it suited them, when she was useful for whatever experiment they were trying to accomplish. He was always forgetting her, underestimating her.

And it was her salvation, the very thing she counted on, as she began to walk towards the cage that held the creature. No-one even looked up as she passed them, half ignoring her presence and the other half thinking her an obedient puppet, someone they didn't need to worry about.

They were so wrong. If they knew what she was planning, they would be very very worried, she thought as she neared the cage.

If they had been more worried about her, about the true threat she was, they never would've spoken about their plans in front of her. And she would never have learnt the true reason, the horrifying truth, behind why they were keeping the creature she had helped find.

The Bad Men planned to harvest the DNA of the creature and mix it with the experiments, the children they had taken, to create the ultimate soldiers. Ones who still held their own unique abilities but could also climb walls and jump between dimensions like the creature. The process would also turn them into mutants, mute obedient creatures that would no longer hold a speck of humanity, no ability to think for themselves and would do anything they were ordered.

She had overheard Brenner being told during one of her training sessions that ten children had already died in trials for the experiment, but he had insisted that they continue trialling the experiment, no matter how long it took. Or how many children's lives were lost.

She couldn't let that happen. She had to stop them, to save the others. Even if it meant she died doing it.

The creature was strapped to wall, metal manacles pinning it's shiny, grey limbs down while tubes pumped a bright blue liquid into veins all over it's body, the drugs destroying it's ability to cross dimensions, keeping it locked in their one. It was slumped forward, breathing heavy, it's rounded chest rising and falling rapidly.

It had been pinned to the wall for four years, a preventative the Bad Men had created when it had escaped that first night when she had

opened the portal. They had gotten it back, but not before it had killed a young girl, whose body had been dragged into the other dimension never to be found by her parents and friends.

She walked closer, her heart racing in her chest, eyes wide as she saw it sniffing the air, lifting it's head from where it was slumped against it's chest, catching her scent, sensing her coming closer. It's mouth, like a venus-fly trap, opened slightly as if in preparation for a meal.

Eleven felt him inside her mind, his presence so comforting and familiar. She caressed the link between them for a second, feeling like her heart was going to break as she closed her eyes, pain tightening her chest until she could barely breathe.

I'm sorry.

There was nothing but silence before his voice slipped in, shaking with nerves and anxiety that twisted her insides, making them quiver.

What do you mean? What's going on?

Goodbye.

No, don't, please...

She cut off his desperate words, throwing down a wall between them, something she had never done in all the years they had spoken, and suddenly she was alone, alone in a way she hadn't been in a long time. A fault-line rippled between her ribs as she shut him out, a hole splitting open inside her chest, leaving her gaping and bleeding inside, like someone had ripped her heart from her chest and knocked all the air from her lungs.

Her entire being seemed to scream at her, her mind reaching out for his, even as she held the wall firmly in place, fighting everything inside her that wanted to pull it straight back down.

It was fragile and shaky, but she held it firm, not letting it fall or falter, even as she felt him trying to get through on the other side, clawing at the block and throwing his mind against it, frantically trying to reach her. As it continued to hold, she let out a sigh of

relief, opening her eyes and staring up at the monster, resolve straightening her shoulders.

It would be okay. He was safe now. He wouldn't feel it. She could do it now.

It was time.

'Experiment 011, get back from there,' a sharp voice suddenly called from behind her, heavy footsteps walking towards her.

Eleven didn't even glance at him, jerking her chin, as she lifted her hand and flung it backwards. The man let out a startled cry, flying across the room and landed with a loud crack against the wall, falling to the floor limp and unconscious.

Chaos erupted, the screams of the lab assistants and the sound of running feet as people began to run from the room, terror covering their faces as they pushed each other to escape, to escape a rogue experiment, one with complete control of her abilities. She held the rest of them back, the guards who raced towards her, trying to stop her, only to slam into and bounce off the invisible wall she had created.

Eleven stared up at the creature as it snarled at her, straining against the metal digging into his flesh, clawed arms slashing through the air, trying to get to her.

She lifted her hands slowly, holding them out in front of her as she reached deep for her power. It rushed up from the very core of her, spreading through every inch of her body so quickly she staggered slightly, almost losing her footing. She quickly righted herself, feeling it pushing against her skin, trying to escape, to do what she needed.

Her eyes narrowed on the evil thing that roared in front of her, heart slamming against her ribs as one of the manacles holding it's arm snapped cleanly in half.

She pushed her power out of her palms, focusing every thing inside her on the creature and watched as it's entire body seemed to spasm in pain, a scream unlike anything she'd ever heard vibrating through

the lab, and barely stopped herself from covering her ears, feeling like they were going to burst from the pressure.

Eleven cried out, pain splintering through her mind, but she didn't pull away, didn't let herself as she pushed more and more of her power at the monster, watching as flakes began to fall off it's skin, floating into the air as it's stomach rippled, as if it's was being ripped inside out.

Blood gushed from her nose, coating her lips and filling her mouth as she swayed on her feet, feeling her powers quickly beginning to drain away, almost empty. She screamed, giving one final burst of power, drawing from deep inside her. She gasped for breath, falling to her knees as the creature exploded into dust, nothing left of it but flecks of dust that covered her.

Eleven's swayed on her knees for a few seconds before collapsing to the tiled floor, landing hard, her powers completely drained and empty. She couldn't move, a roaring in her ears drowning out the angry yells of the Bad Men around her as they moved closer to her, tears soaking her cheeks and mixing with the blood that now trickled from her nose and ears, soaking into her paper gown.

Her entire body ached, pulsing like a bruise, every muscle and bone feeling like they were made of porcelein, so fragile the slight touch would shatter them. But she couldn't help the smile that curved her lips, triumph rising inside her.

She'd done it. She killed the creature. They'd all be okay now.

Eleven desperately opened her mind, reaching for the wall between them and slumped mentally in relief as she found it still intact, her mind clinging to it, using every tiny bit of energy she had left to keep it upright and stable. To keep him safe.

'You stupid, little....' a voice growled above her.

Eleven cried out as a foot suddenly slammed into her ribs, pain vibrating up her side. She tried to curl into a ball to escape the blows but she was too weak, her muscles twitching usefully, unable to move an inch.

She stared up at the man's red face as he glared down at her, dark eyes cold as he reached for his side and pulled out a gun, knelling beside her and pressing it bruisingly hard against her forehead.

Eleven raised her head, the muscles in her neck trembling and burning as she leant up into it.

Do it. Do it! she screamed at him silently, wanting nothing more than for it to end. For all of it to go away.

'Stop,' a voice suddenly said, cold and calm.

The gun was suddenly yanked away, and Eleven felt tears fill her eyes as her head slumped back against the cold floor, her chance at escaping the horror taken away.

She turned her head slowly and stared at Brenner, the voice that had spoken, who watched her impassively, expression almost bored, before turning to look at the guard who had kicked her.

'Don't waste you're bullets. She's pretty much dead already. No use taking her to the infirmary, no-one is going to want a defective soldier who can't follow orders. Just throw her outside and let the cold do the rest. We'll deal with her body later'.

Fury rose inside her quickly as she stared at Brenner, the urge, the need, to hurt him like he'd hurt her and so many others, almost choking her. When before there had only been fear when she looked at him, now there was only rage.

I'm going to kill you one day, she thought, screaming it at him in her mind, eyes dark and full of so much hate she saw him recoil, eyes widening slightly. They narrowed after a minute and he stood straighter, straightening his tie and turned away, not even glancing back at her as he walked out of the room.

'Get rid of her now. And someone clean up this mess', he said as he left, gesturing at the dark dust coating the floor that was all that was left of the creature.

Hard hands dragged her up off the floor, fingers digging painfully deep in her shoulders. Eleven cried out, struggling weakly as they

dragged her down the hall. She closed her eyes, drifting away into the darkness of unconsciousness, head bobbing as they pulled her along.

She came full awake with a startled cry, icy-cold air brushing against her bare skin as they stepped outside, goosebumps rising on her arms and legs. The man threw her out into the darkness where she landed in a soft pile of snow on her back, before slamming the door behind without a backward glance.

The snow quickly soaked through her thin paper gown, leaving her shivering, her breathing coming in panicked gasps as the cold began to burrow into her skin. Eleven stared up at the night sky, at the stars that seemed to wink at her, eyes wide with shock, her breath rising in a white mist in front of her.

It was so cold, she thought dumbly, as she lay there, all the warmth draining from her body, as the cold seeped further and further into her, her fingers and toes slowing losing all feeling.

You have to move, some instinct inside her screamed. You have to move now, walk, crawl, shimmy on your stomach but start moving.

Eleven nodded and rolled onto her stomach slowly, groaning with every movement as her musle seemed to protest, spasming painfully. She tried to crawl across the snow, her numb, swollen and red fingers digging uselessly into the icy piles, unable to get a grip. She barely moved an inch, too weak to climb to her feet, her muscles stiffening and going rigid with cold, her entire body shivering violently.

She whimpered, hot tears filling her eyes as she lay there, curling up slightly, before closing her eyes.

I can't do it, she thought, mind going fuzzy, her thoughts fading as she blinked, her frozen eyelashes crunching as she blinked, lips trembling .

She couldn't fight anymore. She was going to die.

Eleven lay in the snow, staring at the skin on her arm and watching numbly as it turned white and then blue, air hissing from between

her chattering teeth, every breath rattling painfully in her chest.

She could feel her hold on the wall she'd erected between them slipping with every second she was in the snow, her strength weakening. She grabbed at it, desperately trying to hold it in place but it slipped away, the wall between them shattering into nothingness, leaving her mind completely open to his.

Her mind immediately reached for his, an instinct she couldn't ignore or control, even if she wanted to.
She felt him reach back, his panic and fear filling her, his voice frantic.

What did they do to you? Are you okay? Please answer.

Snow...Bad Men....left me here...

You're out in the snow? It's less than 0 degrees tonight. You need to move, you need to get inside now.

His terror rushed into her, so strong it left her dizzy but she couldn't help but smile dazedly at the demanding tone in his voice, giggling quietly even as her eyelids grew heavy, her mind fuzzy and disorientated.

So....bossy...

Eleven, come on. You need to move. You have to get somewhere warm. Please. he begged, and she can hear the tears in his voice, pain, both his and hers, rippling through her.

...but...I killed it...it's okay now...don't worry...

It's not okay. You hear me! You have to move now or you'll...

A choking noise echoed inside her head, as if he was sobbing. Eleven's chin wobbled, her face crumpling as tears filled her eyes.

I'm going to die...

No, you're not! You're not. You just can't. Eleven please...

You need to block me.... don't want you...feel it..

No, I won't leave you! Not till you're safe.

Eleven's eyes closed and she couldn't force them open again, the darkness beneath beckoning at her temptingly and holding her captive.

I'm sorry I broke my promise, she told him, a single tear slipping from her closed eyelid and freezing on her cheek as she succumbed and let the darkness pull her away, his pained cry of despair the last thing she heard...

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An annoying crunching noise pulled her back into consciousness, away from the peace of the darkness. She frowned, irritated, wrenching her eyelids open, her hand twitching on the ground as she tried to bat the noise away, wanting to be left alone, to go back to the oblivion of sleep.

She stared blankly, uncomprehending, at the piles of snow that had fallen around her while she slept, covering her like a blanket, her heart beating sluggishly in her chest.

The crunching noise came closer and closer, along with the puff of heavy breaths, as if someone was running by her. Why would someone be running in the snow?

'S-s-top....' she whispered, her voice so weak it came out as a mere whisper, barely audible to her own ears, closing her eyes again.

The crunching noise, that she now recognised as footsteps, came to a halt and she heard a loud gasp sound in the quiet of the night.

'Holy shit!' an unfamiliar male voice breathed, shocked.

A heavy body landed beside her, hands that felt blistering hot against her frozen skin shaking her frantically, trying to rouse her.

'Shit, shit, shit! Oh, god, you're dead...Can you hear me? If you're alive you need to speak.'

'L-l-leave me a-l-l-one...stay h-he-re' she begged, words slurred as she opened her eyes to slits, her sight so blurry that she could just make out the fuzzy outline of a tall, slim body crouched beside her and a pair of shocked, brown eyes staring down at her.

No! Keep fighting...please...

His voice slipped back into her mind, his words spat out as if between gritted teeth, clearly holding back a scream, trying to hide it from her. The pain in every word, her pain that he was feeling, suffering through alongside her because she couldn't block him, made her begin to cry, tears falling to her cheeks and freezing there.

I'm sorry...

'I'm so sorry,' the boy whispered, voice wet and trembling, 'But if I don't do this you'll die.'

El screamed, her hands curling into fists and thumping against the ground as she felt something digging into her mind, like a hand clamping around her brain, it's fingers digging deep.

She whimpered, her mind pushing against the hold, desperately trying to push him out as she felt him take complete control of her body.

Her body jerked to her feet, her legs trembling and spasming uncontrollably as she stood in the snow, sobbing as her stiff, frozen muscles and nerves screamed back to life when before there had been blissful numbness.

'I'm sorry, I'm sorry. I swear, you'll be okay. I'm going to get you help. Just stay awake, you need to stay awake.'

The voice kept talking to her, trying to keep awake, but she couldn't focus on his words, head spinning dizzily as she hung between consciousness and the darkness. His grip on her mind forced her to put one heavy, numb foot in front of the other, over and over as they made their way through the woods, wading through high drifts of snow that soaked her over and over.

They walked for what felt like hours before her legs finally gave up,

collapsing beneath her, even with him controlling her, and she fell into the snow.

'No, no...hold on,' the boy cried and reached down for her, swinging her up into his arms, and began to run. She bobbed up and down in his arms, feeling his warm, panicked breaths against her ear and his heart pounding against her back.

Her vision began to fade, grey curling around the edges of her sight, her thoughts fading away, unable to concentrate on anything and she knew.

This was it, she thought, her hands falling from where they were wrapped around his neck, her head lying listlessly against his shoulder as her vision faded completely and the darkness took her again.

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Eleven screamed over and over as she was startled into consciousness by someone lowering her, inch by inch, into warm water. She clawed frantically at the arms that held her down, hot tears filling her eyes as she thrashed weakly in the water, trying to climb out.

The water, which in truth was only lukewarm, feel like it was boiling her alive as her skin slowly defrosted, her toes and fingers tingling with painful pins and needles, her skin feeling like it was on fire.

'Please....stop....stop...' she cried, her entire body shaking, slumping weakly against the cool porcelain, sight blurry with tears.

'I'm so sorry, honey. But we need to, you need to get warm or you'll...' a female voice said, shuddering with tears, one hand tightening on her shoulder as the other grabbed her hand, holding on tight.

Eleven barely heard her words, too focused on the agonising screams that sounded in her head over and over, echoing her own.

'I'm sorry, I'm so sorry...' she whispered aloud, tears soaking her warm and sticky cheeks.

She reached out and tried to cut the connection, sawing at it

desperately, but she couldn't, too confused and weak, to help him.

I'm sorry...

It was her last thought before her eyes slid shut and she fell into the darkness again, the pain, both hers and his, fading away with it.

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Eleven opened her eyes with a quiet groan, slowly opening her eyes, flinching under the fluorescent lights that shone brightly over her. Sweat coated her forehead and feeling way too warm, she wiggled up slightly, puffing, her weak muscles trembling at the movement and making her slump against her pillow. A headache pulsed beneath her eyes, sharp and incessant, making her grimace and lay still.

She carefully wiggled stiff and sore fingers and toes under the piles of blankets that covered her, stilling as she felt something warm shift against her body as moved.

She lifted the corner of a blanket and stared at the rubber container she recognised as a hot water bottle that lay against her bare legs, her confusion growing, eyebrows drawing together.

Where was she? What was going on?

'You look like shit'.

Eleven blinked at the unfamiliar voice, turning her head slowly to stare at the skinny girl around her age who was perched on the end of her bed, cross-legged, bright red hair pulled back into a pony tail, her narrowed green eyes studying her closely as her nose, which was covered in smattering of freckles, scrunched up slightly.

Are you there? Are you okay? If you can hear please answer. I need to know you're alright, that you're alive.

His voice drifted into her mind as she stared at the girl, startling her so much she jumped. Her heart dropped at how weak and tired he sounded, voice hoarse from screaming.

Eleven weakly opened her mind to his, wanting, needing to reassure

him, her mind needing to touch his as much as she needed her next breath.

I'm...here...

Her mind immediately snapped back away from his, too weak to keep reaching for him, and she blinked, coming back to focus and staring at the red-haired girl who watched her curiously.

Eleven frowned at her, swallowing hard.

'Who are you?' she asked, her voice raspy and small. She coughed as the words caught in her dry throat and gingerly shifted on the bed, trying to sit up straighter.

She stiffened as a sharp pain shot across her mind, biting her lip hard to keep from crying out.

'Whoa, you alright?' the girl asked, her eyes wide as she saw the pain flash in her eyes and began to crawl towards, hand outheld.

'Max!' a gruff voice suddenly yelled, breaking into silence. El stiffened, eyes going wide while the girl rolled her eyes, snatching her hand back and turning to look at the huge man who stood in the doorway, hands on his hips, face folding down into a dark scowl.

'I told you to leave her alone.'

Max, groaned loudly, reluctantly coming to her feet and stomping over to the door, her footsteps loud on the tile floor.

'Come on, Hop! She's the first girl who's been here in ages. I'm drowning in testosterone.'

The man's lips twitched up slightly in amusement but his expression was stern as he pointed at the door.

'Out!'

The girl grumbled, but she obediently left, kicking the door on the way out.

The man came into the small room, seeming to take up the entire space and Eleven felt her sluggish heart-beat begin to race. She stared at him, eyes widening even more, watching as he was followed by a slight brown-haired woman whose face was gentle and brown eyes soft as she looked down at her, and a brown-haired boy who stood beside them quietly.

The man studied her for a minute but didn't approach her, knowing she was seconds from bolting, noticing how she had slowly began to inch to the side of the bed in case she needed to escape, even if she herself hadn't.

'Don't worry, you're safe here. No-one here will hurt you'.

He waited patiently as the girl stared at him, her eyes searching his face, as if searching for a sign he was lying before she nodded slowly, showing him she understood.

'My name is Jim Hopper and I am in charge of the running of a government program that is dedicated to the retrieval of children who have been kidnapped by the false department called the Department of Energy. Children like yourself. This is how we found you tonight, we were trying to find a way into the building, to help shut down the facility. This is my wife, Joyce,' he said, gesturing at the woman who smiled warmly at her and then to the teenage boy beside her, 'and her son, Will. Can you tell me your name?'

She shook her head, wrapping her arms around herself protectively.

'Eleven. They called me Eleven. I...don't...I can't remember my real name.'

Hopper and Joyce exchanged a look that she couldn't decipher, before looking back down at her.

Joyce looked at the girl, remembering how she'd looked when Will had rushed into the tiny shack of a house they had rented for the mission, in order to be conspicuous in the little town of Hawkins, screaming for their help. She was the thinnest teenage girl she had ever seen, every rib sticking painfully through her soaked hospital gown, as if she hadn't eaten in weeks. Her lips had been as white as

the snow behind them, and her skin so blue that Joyce had been sure she was dead. Only the rapid rise and fall of her chest had shown she was still alive.

Her heart broke at the fear shining in her warm brown eyes, wanting nothing more than to take in her arms and hold her tight till that fear faded away, until she truly believed she was safe.

Eleven's eyes skittered past them as she curled up to make herself seem smaller, abruptly meeting the soft brown eyes of the boy, eyes that were the same as the woman's. She stared at him for a long moment, frowning.

She knew him. But how?

The boy, Will, met her eyes, his lips curling up into a gentle smile and it clicked, her eyes widening.

'It's you,' she whispered, sitting up quickly and ignoring the dull pounding that began in her head at the movement, eyes wide. 'You're the one who found me.'

The boy grinned, glancing at the brown haired woman who nodded, waving him over encouragingly, a kind smile on her face.

He walked towards her, sitting on the edge of the bed by her hip, and looked down at her, his brown hair falling into his eyes.

Hello Eleven.

Eleven's eyes widened in shock as his voice flittered into her mind and she gaped at him.

'You can talk in my head like Him.'

Will's eyebrows drew together in confusion, glancing at his Mom and step-father anxiously, worried that the Bad Men may have found a way to get into their captives minds.

'Like who?' Hopper asked, stepping forward, thick eyebrows drawing together.

Eleven frowned, lips pursing slightly as she struggled to find the words to explain it.

'The boy who...speaks in my head, the one who...' she trailed off, frustrated, before continuing as the words came to her, 'who can feel what I feel and I can feel what he feels.'

Joyce's eyes widened and she walked towards her, hovering by the bed, stunned.

'Your soulmate? You can hear him in your head?' she asked, flicking a look at Hopper who looked as shocked as she felt.

That sort of connection was so rare it had almost become a myth. Almost no soulmates had it anymore. Only the strongest souls, the ones who had had such a need for the other that had become one, could endure it

El frowned, confused, feeling utterly lost at the awe on their faces, resisting the urge to squirm.

'Soulmate?'

They all stilled, disbelief filling them as they all had the same realisation, seeing the genuine confusion crumpling her forehead as she looked at each of them in turn.

She didn't know what a soulmate was. How was that even possible?

'Eleven...' Hopper began, words halting as his voice cracked. He cleared his throat before continuing, 'How old were you when they took you?'

'Nine'.

'And...and how long were you there?'

Eleven weakly lifted her hands, holding up six fingers.

Joyce recoiled in shock, her hand reaching for Hopper's and clutching him, horror filling her. Hopper squeezed back, his face going a sickly white that matched Will's own as they all stared down at the tiny girl

on the bed, drowning in the piles of blankets as she stared back.

Six years. That poor girl had been in that torture chamber that masqueraded as a laboratory for six years! Hopper could only imagine what she had gone through, the things she had seen, and had done to her. She'd been taken so young that something as integral to her being as a soulmate hadn't been explained to her yet.

Joyce pulled away from Hopper, sitting down beside her, resisting the urge to cup her face as she saw Eleven pull away from her slightly, expression wary, fear flashing through her eyes.

'A soulmate is the....the person you're meant to be with. You're other half. He...or she is the person who once you find them you can't bear to live without. That's what the mark that you have somewhere on your body means. It's something we all have that matches our soulmate so that when we meet them we can recognise who they are to us,' she said, pointing at Will who held up his arm with a small smile, showing off the swirl of colour that circled his wrist.

'And like mine,' Joyce continued, lifting the sleeve of her short-sleeved black shirt and showing Eleven the grey tendril of smoke that spiralled up her shoulder, her own soul mark that matched Hopper's. She sent him a bright smile which he returned, lip twitching into a straight-lipped smile, blue eyes warming.

Eleven frowned as she listened, her eyes dropping to her left arm, before they darted back to Joyce who, noticing the shocked understanding in her eyes, smiled warmly at her.

He...the boy in her head was her soulmate? That's why she could hear him in her mind, why she could feel his emotions and he could feel hers? That's what she had been missing all these years, the knowledge she had lacked, and the one thing she had never understood.

He was her other half.

Eleven slowly pulled the blanket covering her down and stared at her left arm, breathing catching in her chest at what she saw.

Her mark gleamed brightly against her pink skin, dark when before it had always been dull, faded and grey.

She lifted her head to look at them, breath coming in fast, choking gasps.

'I...I don't understand. It's never looked like this before. It was always grey before'

Hopper frowned, scratching his chin thoughtfully.

'They must've had used something to stop the connection between them, something strong enough that it would kill the link between them so she couldn't call for help'.

Eleven nodded, taking a deep breath to try and calm herself.

'Blockers', she said, quietly.

Will nodded as well, turning to Hopper, expression serious.

'They tried to inject me with something when they caught me scoping out the place and realised I had abilities like the other kids. That must've been it.'

Hopper sighed, rubbing his eyes, feeling suddenly exhausted, before dropping his hands and studying the girl on the bed, her eyes huge in her head as she watched him.

'Do you mind giving us a moment?' he asked Joyce quietly and she shook her head after looking at him for a minute, kissing his scruffy cheek before turning to give Eleven a reassuring smile.

'I'm just going to go and get you something to eat. You must be starving', Joyce said, her smile widening as El nodded eagerly, her empty stomach gurgling at the thought of food, as a tiny smile curved her lips, the first sign of trust she'd given them.

'Come on, you,' Joyce said fondly as she wrapped an arm around Will's shoulders, pulling him close and running a hand over his hair as they walked to the door.

Eleven frowned at the easy touch and affection between them, the sight completely foreign to her.

Will's eyes turned to hers as he reached the door, and they softened, understanding, waving at her seconds before the door closed behind them, leaving her alone with Hopper.

He dragged a chair over and sat on it backwards, leaning on his arms as she watched him nervously.

He sighed after a few minutes, running a hand over his balding head, before meeting her eyes.

'I'm going to give you the same choice I gave the other children we have rescued. There are two options. You can be placed with a new family, one that knows about your background and your abilities and start your life over. Or...or you can join my program and use your abilities to save others and to help shut down the other facilities and laboratories. The decision is yours, no-one else's. Whatever you decide we'll do'.

Eleven looked at him, eyes wide, studying his face intensely. She relaxed slightly as she recognised the kindness and honesty in his eyes.

No-one had allowed her to make a decision in so long she had almost forgotten the feeling and was overwhelmed, even stunned by the freedom.

She thought hard for a minute, before she tilted her head at him, expression curious.

'Why do you do it?'

Hopper's eyes grew sad and he looked away for a minute, tugging at the blue hair tie that curled around his wrist absent-mindedly, before he turned back to her.

'They took my daughter when she was five and she....she didn't make it. I didn't find her fast enough. I want to make sure they can never do that to another child. I want to stop them.'

Eleven nodded, swallowing the lump in her throat that formed as she saw the pain in his eyes that he quickly pushed away, looking at her expectantly, awaiting an answer.

She thought back to all the Bad Men had done to her, everything they had stolen from her, and all the times they had hurt her and the other children, the ones she had seen taken for tests and experiments to never return again, and she knew.

She couldn't just start a new life, just forget about everything that happened and would continue to happen if she didn't do something to help. She needed to help them. She wanted them to get out as well, to have a chance to be free.

And, she thought, eyes narrowing slightly, she wanted the Bad Men to pay for what they'd done to her, to all of them.
Eleven lifted her chin, her eyes meeting Hopper's for the first time, and he blinked, startled by the determination in them.

'I want to stay. I want to stop them too.'

Hopper looked at her for a second, before a smile curled his lips and he held out his hand.

'Well then...welcome to the compound, Eleven'.

El looked at his hand for a second, before reaching out and shaking it firmly, feeling something settle inside her, knowing for the first time in years that she was safe and truly where she was supposed to be.

She was going to stop them, no matter what it took.

2. Chapter 2

Notes for the Chapter:

> Hey everyone! OMG, I was completely blown away by all the reviews I got for the first chapter. Thank you so much x I got a bit of writing done last night so I thought I'd post the next chapter. I really hope you like it as much as the first.

Four years later (1994)

Nineteen year old El Hopper walked into her dark apartment, completely shrouded in shadows, slowly unravelling her scarf, exhaustion beating at her with every step.

Hunger gnawed at her stomach, reminding her that she hadn't eaten all day but she stubbornly ignored it, knowing the fridges and cupboards were empty. She set her scarf down on the counter, and sighed as she stared around at the almost empty living room, wishing she could muster the energy to do or feel something. Anything.

It still came as a surprise to her when she walked in to realise that this was her home now. There was no longer any warmth, laughter or deafening noise from the people who had become her family, the familiar noises that had told her she was home.
Instead it had been replaced with silence, silence which did nothing to distract her from the emptiness of her life, and the gaping hole inside her, like she'd been punched in the chest, that just kept getting bigger everyday she stayed away from her family and blocked....

No, she thought, quickly pushing the thought away, agony rippling along the edges of the emptiness, making her curl into herself, wrapping her arms around herself in a futile effort to keep from breaking.

She didn't know why she bothered. She knew she was already broken.

Her life was empty. She barely ate, leaving the house early every

morning and wandering around the city like a ghost before coming home and going to sleep. It was a empty routine of nothing and emptiness. But it was the only thing she had.

El slowly walked towards her room, wanting nothing but to sleep and forget everything for a few hours. The ominous creak of the floorboards shifting behind her made El stiffen, eyes widening. She slowed her steps, turning her head slightly to peek behind her. Her breath caught in her chest as saw a shadow moving out of the corner of her eye, hands clenching into tight fists.

They'd found her, she thought, heart racing in her chest as she took a deep breath. The Bad Men had finally found her.

But they wouldn't get her. She wouldn't let them. Not this time.

El spun in a quick circle, catching the shadow of guard as they stumbled back, barely dodging the fist she swung at them, grazing their stubbled chin. The fist she used as a ruse, distracting him from the kick that quickly took his legs out from under them.

He landed hard with a loud crack, a grunt escaping him as the breathe was knocked out of him. El strode forward, eyes narrowed, movement faltering as the person sprung up onto his feet in one smooth move and turned towards her.

The shadow stalked towards her, his fist rearing back and aiming straight for her chest. El turned, trying to spin away but she wasn't quick enough and his fist slammed into her shoulder. El cried out, biting her lip as she staggered backwards at the blow, pain vibrating down her arm.

Fury roared into her and El lunged at him with a yell, tackling him to the ground. She hit him over and over, her anger only rising as he blocked every blow, and bucked beneath her, trying to throw her off.

Her fist finally made contact with his mouth and satisfaction filled her as she heard his muffled curse.

'Why are you here? Who sent you?' she gritted out between blows, puffing as her blows got weaker and weaker, her arms feeling heavy,

the muscles quivering from disuse.

His hand clamped over her forearm and squeezed hard. El shifted, stilling as his touch quickly got hotter and hotter, going from an annoying warmth to a scalding heat that singed through the thin material of her skin and scalded her skin.

El gave a pained cry and snatched her arm out of his grip, scrambling off him to her feet. Her eyes widened as she grasped her stinging arm, her fingers feeling the hole burnt into her shirt as she watched a small tendril of smoke rise from the material.

She gaped as she saw the flame that glowed and flickered in the darkness in front of her, realisation suddenly dawning inside her.

She ran to the wall, quickly flicking the light on, and stared at the very familiar man who lay on her living room floor, smirking at her, a flame sitting in the palm of his hand.

He'd changed so much in the year since she'd left, she thought as she stared at him, heart racing. His hair was so much shorter than the afro she'd grown up seeing, now cropped closely to his head, and he was more muscular, his chest straining against his shirt. But the narrow, considering look in his eyes was the same, the look that had always made her feel like he could see inside her and knew everything she tried to hide.

He wiped his mouth with his other hand, wincing as he brushed the cut on his lip that seeped blood before climbing to his feet with a groan.

'You know, it's kind of depressing to know that you can still kick my ass without your powers and after a year of not training'

'Lucas,' El breathed, shock leaving her frozen, not knowing what to do or say.

She hadn't seen Lucas in a year, not since the day she had left everyone and everything behind. He was part of Hopper's team, the team she had worked with to take down the Bad Men and shut down the laboratories. The team that had become her family, the only one

she truly remembered. Lucas, Will, the boy who'd plucked her from the snow and saved her life, his mother Joyce, Max, and Hopper who'd brought them all together and took her in. Who had changed her entire life.

He was like her, one of the children who had been saved by Hopper and chosen to stay and fight the Bad Men. His ability to create and control fire had been one that had saved their lives more than once.

But she didn't understand why he, of all people, would've come to find her. They'd never been as close as the others, he'd always been closer to Will and Max and had been stand-offish and often cold to her.

Why was he here?

Lucas tilted his head at her, looking at her for a minute before his lip twisted up into a sardonic smile, closing his hand and extinguishing the flame within it.

'Nice to see you, El.'

She shifted self-consciously as he looked her up and down, expression blank, his eyes narrowing slightly, hiding the shock he felt as he looked at her.

She was so thin, he thought as he stared at her, carefully hiding his reaction behind the blank mask he had perfected long ago. Her clothes hung off her already tiny frame, her long brown curls hung in dull, unwashed strands that stuck up in every direction, her face was pale, cheekbones poking through her skin and dark circles hanging under her eyes.

El stiffened as his eyes traced over her, obviously judging and finding her somehow lacking, and crossed her arms over her chest.

'What are you doing here? How did you find me?' she asked, voice shaking slightly as she clutched her elbows tightly.

Lucas ignored the question, and turned his head to study her bare apartment that had only a threadbare couch and faded carpet in the living room and a small dining table and single chair, the wall paper

peeling in several places.

He sniffed derisively.

'Well...this place is a piece of shit. What the hell are you doing living here?'

El's mouth fell open for a second before she snapped it shut, glaring at him.

'Good thing you don't live here then. It's the only place I could afford.'

Lucas turned and pinned her with a pointed look.

'Bullshit,' he said, his tone so casual and even she just blinked at him dumbly, 'I know for a fact that you have heaps of money left over from the missions. Why haven't you used that to get a better apartment?'

El blinked at him, disbelief filling her and she just shook her head at him.

'You hacked into my bank account? Jesus, Lucas, does privacy mean nothing to you?'

Lucas glared at her, stalking over to stand over her, expression dark.

'Don't give me that shit. You just left. No explanation at all. I had to check up on you somehow. We've had no idea where you were, if you were okay, if you were even alive for a damn year! I just managed to find you last week. Everyone was terrified, El.'

El swallowed, her throat tightening painfully as she remembered the devastated looks on the faces of her family as she walked out, drowning out their voices as they'd begged for answers, answers she couldn't give them.

She quickly shook her head, pressing her lips together hard to stop them trembling, and determinedly pushed the memory away, refusing to let him make her feel guilty.

No, she had done the right thing. She had to leave, she just had to.

'Do they know where I am? Do they know you're here?' she asked, her hands beginning to shake at the thought of having to face them all.

Lucas snorted, rolling his eyes at her.

'Am I breathing? No, they don't. We're under strict orders to leave you alone. Hopper, Joyce and the others would kick my ass if they knew I was here.'

El frowned, confused.

'Why are you here, Lucas? What do you want?'

Lucas looked at her for a long minute before sighing, closing his eyes for a second before opening them again with an annoyed huff.

'We....I...need your help', he said, practically choking the words out as if it physically hurt him to ask her.

El shook her head, eyes wide and breath suddenly fast, holding a hand out in front of her to stop him coming any closer.

'No. No way. I told you when I left I was done with all that. No more missions, no more fighting, no more saving people. I am done.'

Lucas stilled at the panic in her eyes, his insides twisting guiltily, but he stepped forward, hand out to her.

'El, just listen to me...'

'No! You have to leave, Lucas. Now', El said, pointing at the door with a shaking hand and spun around, walking quickly to her room before she completely lost it and broke down in front of him.

There was nothing he could say to her that could change her mind.

'Max is missing.'

El froze at the quiet words, breath catching as every muscle in her stiffened, forcing her to a halt.

Except that.

Max. Max had been the first face El had seen when she'd woken in the compound and started her new life. She had quickly become her best friend, teaching her everything about music, how to skate, how to put patches on her denim jacket, and how to flirt with boys. They had been inseparable the three years she'd lived in the compound, and she had missed her so much the last year that it physically hurt to think of how she had left her behind with barely a word and how much she must have hurt her.

Max had been the only one of their group who hadn't had abilities or powers of any kind. Her ability was hacking. She was able to break into any computer or database in the world, and had actually found Hopper by hacking into the compounds system and contacting him. Her little brother, however, had had abilities and had been taken by the Department of Energy when he was only four. She had been looking for him ever since and had joined Hopper in order to search for him.

Missing? Max couldn't be missing. It just wasn't possible. It couldn't happen.

El turned around slowly, eyes wide.

'What do you mean she's missing?'

Lucas met her eyes, pressing his lips together.

'Hopper and Joyce haven't heard from her in over a month. And she's not at her apartment, Joyce already called and they said she told them she was going home for a few months.'

El relaxed slightly, her panic fading slightly.

'Lucas, it's Max. How many times has she run off with some guy she met at a club without telling us and turned up fine a few weeks later. She'll turn up.'

Lucas shook his head, expression grim.

'Not this time. The last message she left them said she had found a

clue to where her brother is and that she was going after him. No-one's heard a word from her since.'

El's eyebrows drew together, confusion filling her.

'But...Jackson's dead. We found the papers years ago'.

'Apparently not,' Lucas said, perching on the edge of her couch, 'Those documents were forged. Max somehow found the real papers that show he was transferred to a different facility before we got there. He's alive. I need your help to find her, to find them both, before she does something stupid and ends up dead.'

'Lucas,' she said, taking a small step back, biting her lip, 'I can't. I'm sorry'.

El kept backing away, barely resisting the urge to run. To just runaway and hide, anything to get away from his questions.

Lucas came to his feet, stalking towards her, watching as she got closer and closer to her bedroom door.

'Why did you leave?' he asked her, the question so abrupt she stilled slightly, hand brushing the edge of the doorknob.

She stared at him, looking like a deer in the headlights.

'I...I told you...I just couldn't do it anymore.'

He shook his head, eyes narrowed.

'You see, I don't believe you, El. I want the real answer. I'm not Joyce or Will, or even Jonathan, I'm not going coddle you or let you hide like a coward. Tell me.'

Rage boiled inside her at his words and El stomped over to Lucas, gritting her teeth and pushed him hard, sending him stumbling backwards.

'Don't you dare call me a coward,' she said, voice dangerously low.

He raised an eyebrow at her, expression challenging, and crossed his

arms over his chest.

'Tell me then. Why did you leave? Huh? Give me a good reason.'

El shook her head, lifting her chin stubbornly, clenching her hands into fists, nails digging deep into the flesh of her palm.

'I don't have to tell you anything, Lucas.'

'It was that kid wasn't it? The one on the last mission?'

El stopped breathing, her fists going limp and falling to her side as she stared at him.

'Stop it, Lucas. Leave it alone', she said shakily, taking a staggering step back as pain lanced through her.

'What was it about this kid? What happened?' Lucas pushed determinedly, ignoring the panic that rose in his throat as the colour quickly drained from her already pale face, exactly how she looked that day almost a year ago when he'd found her practically catatonic, holding the body of a small child as she rocked back and forth, her eyes wide and blank, completely mute. The last mission before she'd left.

'Shut up,' El cried, reaching up to pull at her limp curls, eyes wide as she spun around, desperately searching for a way out, a way to escape.

She couldn't do this.

She grasped desperately at the leash she kept on her emotions, feeling it slip away with every question, her long-dormant powers churning and rising inside her, trying to find a way out.

'Tell me!'

'Stop it!' she screamed, spinning towards him as the leash snapped completely, her power rising up and pouring out of her in a dizzying and unstoppable wave.

Lucas's eyes widened as he saw it rushing towards him and quickly

braced his legs, hands up, fists clenched. He gritted his teeth as it hit him, every muscle in his body tensing as he skid a few feet around the room. He let out a sharp cry as his back slammed against the far wall, pain pulsing across his shoulder-blades at the impact.

He grimaced as her power faded as quickly as it came, releasing him from being pinned against the wall, and stepped forward, ignoring the aching in his back with a single-minded focus he had ironically learnt from the monsters who had taken him and kept him prisoner when he was a child.

Lucas froze when he saw El slumped forward, shaking hands bracing on her knees as her entire body shuddered and swayed weakly. He rushed over to her and wrapped an arm around her waist, catching her seconds before she hit the ground, dragging her over to the couch.

El gasped her breath, squeezing her eyes shut as she desperately tried to swallow back the bile that threatened to rise into her throat, her stomach clenching and roiling nauseously. She barely noticed Lucas's touch as he settled her on the couch, tugging a blanket quickly around her as she shivered so hard she seemed to vibrate, hovering over her worriedly.

Every muscle in her body felt weak and limp like noddles as she curled into a ball, pressing her face into the threadbare and faded couch, the hot tears that coated her cheeks and mixed with the blood dripping from her nose, soaking into and staining the thin material.

She couldn't do this anymore. It was too much, she thought as she took a shuddering breath, reaching up wipe the tears and blood off her cheeks with trembling fingers before she raised her face up to meet Lucas's eyes.

Lucas's stomach clenched as he met her eyes, red-rimmed and so full of pain that he couldn't hold back the guilt that rose within him at pushing her so hard. He just wanted her to snap out of it, to talk to him and to save her from the nightmare of nothingness he knew she had been living for the past year. He just wanted to understand.

El let out a breath, before she began speaking the words she had been

holding inside for the longest year of her life, her eyes tracing the flowered pattern of the couch.

'Do you remember on that last mission when...when that little boy died? Twenty-three?' she asked, her voice a raspy whisper.

Lucas nodded, face grim.

He would never forget that day. He sometimes wished he could, but no matter what he did he couldn't forget the horror that had filled him at the sight of the little boy's tiny body, a bullet hole in his head and his dark eyes staring emptily up at him. Twenty-three had only been nine, stolen from his mother by the Bad Men when he was born, who had shot him point-blank to stop them from saving him, from letting him be free.

That horror had quickly been followed by a terror that left him cold as he'd found El clutching the little boy as she'd rocked back and forth, face covered in the blood of the guard she had shot and her eyes empty and blank. She hadn't spoken a word no matter how hard they'd tried to get her to respond, not until three days later when she came out of her room, bags in her hands, eyes dead but face determined as she told them she was leaving.

El pressed her lips together to stop them from trembling as she wrapped her arms around herself, feeling the gaping hole inside her pulsing painfully, before she lifted her eyes from the flowered pattern to meet his.

'He looked like Him.'

When Lucas frowned, eyebrows drawing together in confusion, El sighed before reluctantly lifting the left sleeve of her shirt, keeping her eyes fixed on Lucas, refusing to look at the soul mark she knew sat there, and turned it around to show him.

Lucas's frown fell away as realisation dawned on him and his face softened a fraction at the sorrow filling her face.

'Oh.'

El nodded, swallowing hard as her throat tightened, thick with

unshed tears, her fingers absent-mindedly caressing her wrist, her only link to Him.

Her soulmate. The boy whose voice had kept her sane, who had kept from dying in that cold, pain-filled laboratory she had been imprisoned in for six years, the only reason she hadn't ended it all. He was also the boy she had been blocking for almost four years and who she knew she had hurt more than anyone else. The one she tried never to think about.

Lucas watched her caress her wrist, and felt his jaw stiffen, not wanting to hurt her further, but he needed her to keep talking. He needed to understand. And he knew that she needed to tell someone.

'I thought you never met him. That you could only...hear him in your mind,' he said quietly.

Everyone knew that El could hear her soulmate in her mind. It had been common knowledge since her first day in the compound, when Max and Will had run to tell him, both stunned by the news. Everyone had a soul mark, a link to their soulmate and a way to find their other half, but that sort of ability was rare and only held by those with the strongest connection.

El snatched her hand away from her wrist as she realised what she was doing and clenched it into a fist before looking at Lucas, shaking her head.

'He showed me what he looked like once in my mind, sent me an image when we were twelve. Twenty-Three...he had the same dark hair and eyes, the same pale skin. They were so similar that when I first walked into that room I thought it was Him. He was all I could see. And I froze'.

Lucas nodded, but didn't speak. El never spoke about her soulmate, about her life in the labs and before, and he didn't want her to stop.

'And that little boy....when I saw him standing there, he was so scared. He was terrified, but...he wasn't terrified of the gun or the man holding him in front of him like a shield. He was scared of me. He looked at me like I was the bad guy, the monster, come to take

him away.'

El shuddered as the memory, the image she could never get out of her head, flashed into her mind, her fingers spasming and digging into her arms.

His dark eyes so wide with terror, backing away from her in panic, closer and closer to the suited male, his hands clutching at the man who seconds later would put a bullet into his brain.

'And then they just shot him...' El continued, voice quiet and almost robotic, eyes faraway, as she plucked at a loose string on her pants, 'just....bang, because if they couldn't have him, no-on else could either. And...after I killed the guard, I saw myself in the reflection of the metal wall behind where they were standing, saw the blood splattered across my face and I knew. I knew he was right. I was a monster. I had become exactly what they wanted me to. A soldier, a killer. And something inside me just...snapped. I broke, Lucas. And I don't know if I'll ever be fixed.'

Lucas opened his mouth to speak, to object, but El held up a hand, speaking again, voice empty and devoid of any emotion.

'And I knew, that if He could see me like that, if He knew what I had done all these years, he'd looked at me the same way Twenty-three had. He'd think I was a monster too. I let them do this to me, I didn't even fight it. I was so angry, I wanted them to pay so badly, I became exactly what they wanted in order to do it. So I left. I had to.'

Lucas stared at her for a second, before slowly walking over to her, sitting down on the couch beside her. He turned to look at her and laid a hesitant hand on her shoulder, squeezing gently.

'You don't know that. You don't know what he'd think. He knows what you went through, what they did to you. He'd understand,' he said, tone gentle as he rubbed her back soothingly.

El shook her head, burying her face in her hands.

'He doesn't know everything. He doesn't know what I've done.'

'You did what you had to to save people, to keep yourself alive on

missions. You're a good person, El. They didn't win.'.

El jerked away from his touch, anger rising in her as she surged to her feet and glared down at him, eyes dark.

'Didn't they? I wanted them to pay for what they did to me and all those other kids I saw hurt and punished and killed. They took me from my home, from my mother, they even took away my name and kept me prisoner for six years. They used me as a test subject, an experiment, a human guinea pig for them to torture and punish when I wouldn't do the horrible things they wanted. They stole everything from me and I wanted to steal everything from them', she spat, before deflating slightly, pushing her hair back from her face, her breath coming in quick bursts.

Lucas stared up at her, stunned by her outburst, from El who was usually the sweest and most even-tempered of them all.

El spoke again, her voice quieter, the fury fading with every word, replacing with a heavy defeat that was somehow so much worse.

'It consumed me. It was all I thought about. I became a soldier, a killer. Seeing Twenty-three, seeing Him in his face just made finally realise it. I can't live like that anymore, Lucas. With the hate and the need for revenge. I wasn't that girl before. I don't want to be what they made me. I want to be the girl I was before. And I can't do that at home.'

Hurt and anger rushed into Lucas and he came to his feet, stepping towards her.

'So what? You just gave up and left the only family you had. You're punishing yourself for things you couldn't control, El. You killed the monster and stopped hundreds of children from being turned into mutants. You saved people.'

'I also killed them', she told him.

Lucas made a frustrated noise in the back of his throat, throwing his hands into the air.

'One doesn't negate the other.'

El shrugged, lip twitching up into a sad smile.

'Maybe not. But I can't do either anymore. I need to save me now before I get in so deep I can't come back out. Please understand, Lucas.'

Lucas sighed, shoulders slumping, all fight leaving him at the pleading look on her face.

'Okay, fine. I won't ask you to fight or come after them with me. But I need your help finding her, to figure out where her brother is being held. Once that is done I'll leave you alone forever. I swear.'

El looked at him for a long moment, knowing this was a bad idea, but she knew she had to. She owed him, and Max and everyone else, this much at least. She bit her lip before nodding jerkily.

'Alright, I'll help. But after that I'm out. For good.'

Lucas nodded.

'Agreed.'

They stood in silence for a long moment, before Lucas frowned, giving her a sudden searching glance that made her nervous.

'Why haven't you looked for Him? If he means so much to you, I mean.'

El stilled at the question, eyes widening, before her face softened slightly.

'He did. Does. He was so kind and selfless. He stayed with me the whole time I was in the snow, he refused to leave for even a second even though it meant he felt everything I did. He kept me sane. I would've given up a long time ago if i wasn't for him. He'd tell me stories all the time, sometimes complete nonsense, or tell me about his life, his family and friends, about himself to distract me from the pain or the fear.'

A small smile curved her lips.

'I didn't even realise what the connection between us meant until Joyce explained it to me. The blockers the Bad Men had injected us with everyday completely cut off the soul-bond, making it impossible for us to call for help. It literally killed the link when the drug was in our system.'

'But one day, three years after they'd taken me, they forgot to give me the drug and a voice slipped into my head, a voice that wasn't mine...'

She clutched the ragged stuffed lion to her chest, fingers curling into the ratty fur as she sobbed, fear a living creature inside her, clawing and digging it's claw into her, refusing to let her be or sleep.

She shivered in the frigid air of her room in the laboratory, nothing but a thin sheet to keep her warm, scalding tears running down her cheeks as she thought of the test she would have to do tomorrow, a test so many of the other kids had failed. And those kids hadn't come back.

She was going to fail, she thought, bursting into tears again and curled up into a small ball, panic tightening her chest. She was going to die.

Are you okay? Don't be scared. It'll be alright.

El's eyes popped open in shock as the soft voice of a boy drifted into her mind and she sat up, shoulders tensing as she peered anxiously into the corners of her dark room.

What the hell was that? she thought, tugging her sheet up to her chin as she saw no-one was there, fear skittering up her spine.

Sorry! I didn't mean to scare you. It's just...you're so sad and I know when I'm upset I feel better if I talk to someone....but you probably don't want to....I'll just go...'

No! *El cried, her voice travelling down the link that she could suddenly trace, a small opening in her mind that she could sense slowly getting bigger as the drug they injected her with everyday faded away with every minute.*

She wiped her running nose with the back of her hand and leant back against her pillow, tucking her lion in by her side.

No, I'd like to talk. If that's okay.

It was a few minutes before the voice came back and she could almost hear the smile in it.

That's definitely okay.

'I thought I was going crazy. But it was the kind of crazy I didn't want to go away. So I came up with excuses to make the injections later and later, purposefully sucking at training and taking longer to finish experiments so I could speak to him. I didn't care that they punished me for it. It...it physically hurt when I couldn't speak to him'.

El's eyes saddened as she remembered how it felt every time they'd injected her with the blockers afterwards and she had to feel him fade away from her. It felt like she'd been hobbled, like a part of her been brutally cut away, leaving a pulsing emptiness behind. She had been so utterly alone, reaching for someone who was no longer able to reach back. And it was the exact way she felt every second of every day now.

'If this is how you feel about him then why are you blocking him?' Lucas said abruptly, eyes narrowed at her, breaking into her thoughts.

El froze, her head snapping towards him, eyes wide.

'How do you even know about that?' she said, shock in her voice.

Lucas lifted one shoulder in a lazy shrug.

'Max told me ages ago. Is this another way of punishing yourself? Cause you think you're not good enough for him?'

El's breath caught in her throat at how easily he'd guessed her reasons, but kept her face blank, except her lips that twisted up into a snarl.

'You don't understand. I'm protecting him!'

'From what?' Lucas asked, blinking at her, completely bewildered.

'From me!'

El looked at him, her expression so abruptly angry, Lucas took a careful step back, eyes narrowed and cautious.

'Didn't you hear a word I just said? He's so...good. I can't look for him, I can't stop blocking him and open the bond because it isn't fair to him. He deserves better than to be shackled with a...a broken mess like me.'

'That's not a decision you get to make', Lucas snapped at her, crossing his arms over his chest, 'That's the only way you're be being unfair to him. He lost a soul-mate too, El. He deserves the chance to decide for himself.'

El raised an eyebrow at him, expression incredulous.

God, the nerve of him.

'Seriously? You want to lecture me on making decisions for my soul-mate? With what you've been doing, hiding it from him all these years.'

Lucas's face darkened and he stabbed a finger at her.

'That's none of your damn business.'

El threw her hands up, completely exasperated.

'That's my bloody point. It's none of your business what I do either. Don't you think I ache for him, that it hurts so badly to stay away that I can barely breathe sometimes. I feel like a part of me is missing every second of every day and it's a hundred times worse because I've already made the initial link. I actually know what I'm missing, what I'm giving up. But I'm doing it for him, to protect him, to give him a chance at a normal, happy life.

'I've tried everything, everything, I could to set him free. I've been blocking the connection for years so he can't look for me, I've been reading every book I can, talking to Professors and experts. I've been trying to find a way, any way, to break the bond but there's nothing', she said, a sob escaping her as she threw herself back onto the couch,

hugging her knees to her chest.

Lucas's glare softened as she saw the tears shining in her eyes and sat down beside her with a heavy sigh, gingerly wrapping an arm around her shoulders, pulling her to him.

El stiffened for a second before her face crumpled and she buried her face into his shoulder, sobbing. Lucas pat her head, feeling her trembling against him and listening as her sobs began to slow after a few minutes before they faded completely.

'El...' he began, voice gentle as he rubbed her back in the same Joyce used to do to them when they had nightmares as kids and felt her relax against him, 'you can't break a connection like that. It'd be like...cutting off your leg or losing your sight. It's a part of you. And it's supposed to be a good thing. Maybe it's what you need to...become whole again.'

El looked up, face flushed and sticky with tears, her eyes bloodshot as they met his.

'How can I do that to him?' she asked, voice trembling as she leant her head against his.

Lucas shrugged, tugging playfully on one of her curls.

'I think what you're doing now is worse. He thought you were dead for six years, El. Then he starts hearing voices in his head before suffering the worst pain imaginable as you almost froze to death only for you to block him.'

'I did it for him. Then....before Twenty-three I did it so he wouldn't have to see it. I didn't want the things we were doing and seeing in his head as well.'

'But he doesn't know that. He must be as confused, scared and hurt as you are. He lost something too. Just...give it a chance, El. Think about it.'

El's stomach twisted at the thought as she gingerly sat forward, every muscle in her tired and aching, as she pulled down the sleeve of her yellow sweater and looked down at the mark she rarely looked at

because she couldn't bear the guilt.

She stared at the constellation of stars that sat across her wrist, the mark she knew matched his. It seemed to twinkle at her, shining brightly as she ran a finger over it and felt something settle inside her.

She took a breath and tilted her head up to look at Lucas.

'Maybe you're right.'

Lucas smacked a hand to his chest, a mock-shocked look on his face, mouth open and eyes bulging.

'Mark the day ladies and gentleman, El Hopper just said I was right...'

El slapped a hand over his mouth, cutting off his words and rolling her eyes.

'I said maybe. But you might as well enjoy it because it's never going to happen again,' she said, before letting out a disgusted yelp and snatching her hand back when she felt a wet swipe across her palm as he licked her.

'Ew! You're so gross, Lucas,' she said, grimacing at him, wiping her hand against her jeans to clean it off.

Lucas grinned at her, before his face abruptly went serious again.

'So you're going to do it...you're going to stop blocking him?'

'I'm going to think about it', she said, the very thought awakening nerves in her stomach that pitched and rolled nauseatingly.

El quickly grabbed his hand, catching his eye, eyes beseeching.

'But...you have to promise me you'll consider doing the same thing. You have to tell him, Lucas. He'll never forgive you if he finds out on his own.'

Lucas pressed his lips together, expression stubborn for a minute, body going rigid, before he relaxed and nodded, his head only

moving an inch. His hand reached up and clamped over his own wrist where she knew a splash of rainbow colour, like the swirl of a paintbrush, twisted around his wrist. He'd always kept his soul-mark hidden from them all, and she'd only found out why when she'd bandaged a cut while on a mission and recognised the same mark as belonging to one of their closest friends.

'Not yet. But I promise I'll think about it too.'

She held out her hand, pinkie out and raised her eyebrows at him, wiggling it expectantly.

Lucas rolled his eyes at the childish gesture left over from their days living together as teenagers but he obediently curled his finger around hers, squeezing and pumping once.

The pinkie swear was their sacred bond. The consequences of breaking it was...Lucas shuddered at the thought, remembering what they'd poured over him after he'd broken his promise to take Max to the movies to instead go on a date.

When Lucas left, promising to contact her soon so they could begin their search, El stumbled to the pile of blankets on the floor that she called her bed, so exhausted from the last few hours that she could barely keep her eyes open. As she lay on her back, holding her arm above her head and staring at her soul-mark, she closed her eyes, falling into her mind.

She opened her minds-eye, staring up at the wall she had erected between them, once rickety and as easily broken as a rotting picket fence but now a impenetrable steel vault that kept them apart, kept them from linking.

She reached deep inside her and slowly began to lift it up, letting it open the tiniest inch. She gasped as a chaotic mess of emotions and thoughts rushed at her through the gap, so overwhelming she almost jerked back into her body.

She shook her head, focusing before she sent the words she wanted him to know through the gap, knowing it wasn't fair, that it would never be enough.

I'm sorry, she thought before slamming the wall closed and opened her eyes, staring up at the muted shadows that shifted and danced across the ceiling, heart racing.

She didn't promise him anything, because she didn't know whether she could keep it. She just hoped he understood.

But she couldn't dwell on it any longer.

I have a job to do, she thought as she closed her eyes, falling into a restless sleep.

She had to find Max.

Notes for the Chapter:

> So....what did you think? As always let me know xx-Katie

3. Chapter 3

Notes for the Chapter:

> Hey everyone! I am loving these reviews!!! OMG, you guys are just amazing xx Okay, I got almost an entire chapter written today so I thought I'd post the next chapter. I promise we'll see Mike and Eleven interactions very soon ;) But for now, I hope you enjoy this chapter from Mike's POV. Hope you enjoy
> - Katie xx

Twenty-year-old Mike Wheeler jerked awake, sheets twisted around his body, sweat coating his forehead and bare chest as he gasped for breath.

His eyes darted frantically around his childhood bedroom, searching the shadows for the voice he had just heard and which seemed to echo, over and over, inside his mind, almost taunting him.

I'm sorry.

Emotions and thoughts that weren't his seemed to pour out of the tiny gap in the block, overwhelming his senses so much that he had to squeeze his eyes shut, hands clutching the sheets hard as he struggled to focus on a single emotion.

He could just make out guilt, fear, shame and so much loneliness his heart ached, the pain so sharp it took his breath. His mind reached out for hers, unable to stop himself and not wanting to, needing to understand, to help her as much as he needed his heart to continue to beat.

But he was too late, the block slamming down between them and closing the tiny gap she had opened, all her emotions fading away from him until it was like they had never existed, like she had never existed. And he was alone again with nothing but the silence inside him.

Mike barely resisted the urge to scream, throwing his pillow across

the room with a strangled cry, eyes wet with tears of frustration.

He threw himself back onto his bed, pinching the bridge of his nose as his temples began to throb, a headache forming behind his eyes.

He didn't understand. Why was she doing this? Why was she blocking him?

He hadn't heard her voice in almost four years, since the day that she had slammed a block down between them without a single warning, cutting him off and leaving him empty, alone and utterly confused.

It had almost killed him all those years ago, when he had reached out for her only to hit a wall, a wall he couldn't get through no matter how hard he'd fought and thrown himself against it. He had been frantic, panic filling him at the thought that they, whoever they were, had somehow gotten her back until he'd realised, icy dread coating his insides, that it was the same as the block he'd felt the night she'd stopped him from feeling her pain.

She had chosen to block him.

He had been alone in his mind for the first time in years, constantly reaching for someone who wasn't there and didn't want to be reached. He could barely function, left with an aching hole in his chest that only seemed to grow as the years passed, an emptiness where she belonged and that only she could fill.

The fact that she had blocked him just as he'd finally understood the truth, understood who she was and what she meant to him after all the years of thinking his soulmate had died, had hurt even worse.

Mike lifted his arm, peering at it in the darkness and could just make out the constellation that seemed to twinkle at him. He sighed, tracing his fingers over the soul mark, thinking he could feel it warm under his touch.

He still remembered the day it had died. He'd been ten years old, playing in the backyard with his sister Nancy when he had fallen to the ground, a voice screaming desperately in his head as a terror so sharp and heavy filled him. A terror that hadn't been his. He'd

vomited onto the grass, screaming over and over for the voice in his head until her voice had been cut off, the fear fading completely. The silence that followed seconds before he fell unconscious had somehow been more terrifying than the screams.

No-one had understood what had happened until his parents had been tucking him into bed after the doctor had finally finished checking him and had seen his usually bright and vibrant mark faded and dead on his arm. And they had known. His soulmate, whoever she had been, was gone.

He had felt like he had died alongside her, like he had lost something precious, and had barely moved for weeks, so grief-stricken he had refused to eat or drink, wanting nothing more than to be alone. But he had survived and had had no choice but to keep living, to try and move on.

And he had, going to school, making friends and he even had a girlfriend for a few months the year he turned thirteen. But his life had changed again that year when he'd felt a fear and sadness that wasn't his fill him, so deep and strong he had felt tears prickling his eyes. He'd reached for it, opening his mind to hers completely, unable to resist the instinct that told him he needed to comfort whoever it was, protect them, and had been left stunned when a small, high voice had slipped into his mind as easily as if it had been doing it every day of his life.

Mike had thought he knew what it meant, who she was, but his mark was dead. She was dead. How was it possible? But he didn't question it, continuing to speak to her whenever the small opening in their minds allowed, and found himself falling more and more in love with her with every conversation, with how selfless and kind she was, protecting him by telling him nothing about herself and her innate curiosity about his life.

He'd gotten up the courage to tell his parents six months after they'd begun to speak to one another, hoping that they could explain about their connection but they had dismissed it, convinced he was imagining it to deal with his loss.

It wasn't until two years later, just before he turned sixteen, on that

terrible night when she had almost died that he had finally learnt the truth...
Mike screamed over and over, screamed for her as he lay on the floor, feeling like his entire body was on fire, muscles spasming and twitching as he twisted and turned, trying to escape the pain.

She was dying, he needed to help her.

Eleven! *he screamed mentally, reaching for her, but all he could hear was her screaming, thoughts so scattered he couldn't connect.*

Tears ran down his cheeks, hot and sticky, trembling so hard his body seemed to vibrate against the carpeted floor, even pinned down by sister's hands on one side as she cried beside him, eyes staring down at him helplessly, eyes dark with fear. His Mom stood on the other side, her face pale and eyes wide, brushing his hair back, muttering soothing words that he couldn't hear, ears buzzing, just watched her mouth moving silently.

The pain finally receded, leaving him slumped weakly against the floor, hair soaked with sweat, chest rising and falling rapidly as he desperately tried to draw air into his burning lungs.

He cried out, jerking his arm up as he felt a burning on his arm, like a brand, and frantically pulled at his sleeve. The burning passed as quickly as it had come and he stilled as he ripped his sleeve up, staring down at his arm, eyes wide and mouth falling open, shock and disbelief filling him.

His mark was alive and bright in a way it hadn't been in years, the five stars in the constellation shining darkly against his white skin.

It couldn't be, he thought, shaking his head slowly, the pain he had felt only moments before completely forgotten as he turned to look at his Mom for answers, eyes wide and full of fear.

Karen's breath hitched in her throat as she stared down at her son's arm, her trembling hand rising to her throat.

'Oh my god,' she breathed, eyes wide.

'Mom...?' he croaked, staring down at the mark, unable to comprehend what he was seeing.

Karen shook her head.

'This can't be...she's dead, she died six years ago!'

'What does this mean? How is this possible?' Nancy asked, knelling beside him, staring at the mark, her hand clutching his, squeezing tight.

'Mike?'

But Mike couldn't hear her, his mind already reaching out, heart pounding and stomach quivering, desperately trying to connect with hers.

Are you there? Are you okay? If you can hear please answer. I need to know you're alright, that you're alive.

There was nothing but silence for the longest minute of his life, until a soft trembling voice answered, so weak and frail his heart stuttered, saying only two words word before the connection fell away again, her voice as familiar to him as his own. It felt like coming home.

I'm…here…

Shocked exhilaration ran through his veins, and he burst into tears, burying his face in his hands, skin mottling a bright red.

Mike looked up at them, wet eyes meeting theirs as they watched him anxiously, a wide grin spreading across his cheeks, a smile they hadn't seen in years, not since the day he was ten years old and his old world had changed forever.

'She's alive. I heard her.'

She was his soulmate. She was alive.

It was the last time he'd heard her voice. He hadn't understood what had happened to her that night, or who the people were who hurt her, until a year ago when he'd been scanning the newspaper and had suddenly frozen, not knowing why dread had spread into his stomach, making it twist and pitch, as his eyes were drawn to one headline that seemed to glow like a beacon, drawing his attention.

Department of Energy under investigation: Evidence found of

the kidnapping and deaths of over 60 children.

He had frantically ripped the paper open, going to the article, cold sweat running down his spine as he read, her voice from years before drifting into his mind as certain words seemed to shout at him.

Child soldiers. Kidnapped. Experimented on like lab rats. Identities destroyed, replaced by numbers.

I don't remember my name. But they call me Eleven.

Eleven? Like the number?

We're all just numbers to them.

Mike had rushed to the bathroom, stomach jerking, slumped over the toilet as he'd barely stopped the bile rising in his throat, physically ill as he'd finally understood.

She'd been one of them. The children who had been stolen by these people and used as an experiment, tortured and kept prisoner for years. It explained so much, the fear she had constantly felt, the pain, the mind-splitting headaches he always had when he spoke to her, echoing her own, and the nosebleeds. He had been feeling what she had.

He blinked, snapping out of his memories as he sat up straighter, jaw firming with sudden determination. He closed his eyes and went into his mind, staring up at the metal wall of the block, brushing his mental fingers against it gently, wishing she could feel it, that she could hear him.

I don't know why you don't want to be found, he whispered, but I promise that I won't give up on you. It doesn't matter to me what happened. I only want to know you're okay.

I'm going to find you. No matter what it takes. I promise.

He pulled back from his mind, and tugged his blanket back over his shivering body, and began to drift back into sleep.

Now I just have to figure out the hell I'm going to find her, he

thought, frowning slightly before unconsciousness took him.

Notes for the Chapter:

> What did everyone think? As always let me know, I love hearing from everyone xx

4. Chapter 4

Notes for the Chapter:

> Hey everyone!!! I wasn't going to post the next chapter today but I'm on such a high from finishing a major chapter last night that I decided to anyways :) Thanks so much for all the amazing reviews, I swear they make my day! Okay...we are introducing another character in this chapter but...it's probably not who you guys are expecting. But don't worry, he's definitely coming into the story soon! Hope you enjoy xx

'Are you shitting me?' Lucas yelled, his voice screeching into the listening device currently residing in El's ear.

El winced, her body spasming as it tried to escape the loud noise, her fingers digging into the brick of the building she was climbing, causing brick dust to rain down and coat her hands in reddish-brown.

She turned her head, glaring down at the bright blue Camaro Lucas sat inside, irritated.

She was literally hanging from her finger-tips, four storeys up, pretty much blind in the pre-dawn darkness and he thought it was a good idea to startle her? Idiot!

'Thanks. I didn't need that ear drum', she said, tone sarcastic, as she began to climb again, her nose dripping irritatingly with blood as she used her powers to hold her steady.

The frigid night air fanned across her face, a white mist rising in front of her face as she puffed for breath, looking up at her destination. Max's bedroom window, where they both hoped she would find something, anything, that could tell them where Max had gone.

Only a few feet to go, she thought, relief filling her as the muscles in her legs started to quiver and burn, no longer used to such activities. She stubbornly pushed on, ignoring the pain, and reached up, pulling

herself higher up the building.

'Well sorry if I was a bit shocked by the news that you're moving into the apartment that you were *supposed* to be casing out this afternoon. How the hell did that happen?' he asked, tone perplexed.

El sighed, leaning her forehead against the cool brick, and shaking her head ruefully, lips pursed slightly.

'I....honestly, I have no idea'.

And it was true. She was still completely bewildered by the decision she had made earlier that day. The decision that had, and still did, feel completely right. There had been something about the apartment, something that drew her in and made her feel like she was welcome. Like she belonged.

She had definitely been welcomed by the wild-haired boy who lived there, she thought, smiling slightly, amused, as she thought back to that afternoon and the strange events that had led to her decision to move in with a complete stranger...

El knelt by the closed apartment door, the knobby end of her pick digging into her palm as she listened intently, waiting for the tell-tale click that would tell her she was in.

Her back was beginning ache from the hunched over position she'd been in for almost thirty minutes but she ignored it, concentrating as she twisted the pick to the left inside the lock, knowing she was close.

She stilled, eyes going wide as she suddenly heard the unmistakable sounds of heavy footsteps heading towards the door. Towards her.

Shit, I thought no-one was home, she thought, heart skipping a beat as she looked around the hall panickily for an escape or a place to hide.

El barely had enough time to slip the pick into her shoe before the door swung open, revealing a guy standing in the doorway. He was average height, probably only a head taller than her with a stocky build, wild curly hair that strained to escape his red, white and blue cap, and brown eyes that stared down at her, mouth hanging open slightly.

El stared up at the boy, her mouth opening and closing dumbly, an embarrassing choking sound escaping her throat instead of the words she desperately needed.

Come on, think! she thought, you need an excuse, any excuse. Come on!

But her mind was completely blank, empty of any helpful ideas.

The boy just looked at her strangely, his brown eyes squinting down at her as she inwardly squirmed, seconds from bolting down the hall and not caring that she would probably look crazy. It couldn't be more embarrassing than the torture of this moment!

His frown fell away after a moment, replaced by a huge grin that seemed to stretch his cheeks, eyes brightening.

'You must be here about the apartment!'

El blinked up at him, eyebrows creasing together in confusion, her nose wrinkling. She frowned, glancing behind her nervously, sure someone must have snuck behind her somehow but there was no-one. He was definitely talking to her.

Shit. Why did this always happen to her?

'Um...actually....' she began, slowly rising to her feet, biting her lip anxiously.

'Come in,' the boy said, grabbing her hand and pulling her into the apartment so fast El's neck snapped back, closing the door behind them.

He let go of her arm so quickly El barely had time to panic at his touch and walked away, leaving her awkwardly pressed against the front door, her mind whirling. She stared at the boy's back, eyes wide, as he gestured around the room, barely hearing the words he was speaking as her hand edged towards the door handle.

Had she just been kidnapped? she thought, stunned. How the hell did this happen?

She yanked her hand back from the handle as he spun back towards her, still grinning, though it was suddenly sheepish as he tugged his cap further

down his forehead.

'Sorry, I'm getting ahead of myself! I'm Dustin. Dustin Henderson. Nice to meet you', he said, holding his hand out.

El looked at his hand for a second before cautiously walking over and shaking it.

I might as well as go along with it, she thought, shrugging inwardly. The sooner she did, the sooner it would be over and she could leave.

'El Hopper', she said, simply.

Dustin stiffened slightly as she said her name, a myriad of emotions suddenly flickering in his brown eyes. El saw surprise and something else, something she didn't recognise before it faded away, and he just smiled at her, eyes crinkling.

'Nice to meet you, El. Now...what do you think?' he said, gesturing grandly at the apartment.

El leant past him to look at the apartment and blinked, stunned by how it big it was.

It was open-plan and airy, with pale blue walls and huge windows. It was furnished eclectically with bright blue couches that looked like you would sink into them, mismatched orange and green chairs that sat around a scratched and tarnished dining table, and a fluffy white rug on the floor. The kitchen was surprisingly clean for a guy's apartment with shiny appliances and fridge with sticky notes all over it, reminders to buy certain foods and appointments. Four doors, obviously leading to bedrooms, were situated right across from the front door.

'It's lovely', she said, surprised, and flushed slightly when she heard Dustin laugh behind her, clearly hearing it in her voice.

'Yeah, it's alright', he said, winking at her, before walking across the room, 'We're on the top floor so we only have the one level but it's huge so we don't mind. We all the share the kitchen and bathroom, which is closest to what would be your bedroom. Just down the hall. Here let me show you.'

He chatted cheerfully to her as they walked across the room, telling her

about his job as an IT specialist in a company downtown while getting his degree and how, because of the weird hours he often worked, she would have the apartment to herself most the time if she chose to move in.

He pushed the door open, and gestured for her to walk in ahead of him. El slowly walked into the room, and was again surprised by how nice it was. It was a decent sized room, way bigger than the shoebox room she was currently living in, with a inbuilt closet, and was painted a pretty soft pink, almost the same shade Hopper had painted her room back home.

She gave a sad smile, trailing her hand over the wall.

'Now...' Dustin began nervously, pulling his cap off and scratching his head, 'the rent is kind of expensive since we're so close to the city but...'

He trailed off as El just looked at him, eyebrows raised expectantly. He sighed and named the number, wincing slightly at the ridiculous price. When she didn't immediately run from the room, Dustin glanced up at her and sighed with relief when he saw her unbothered expression.

'Okay,' he said, smiling as he clapped his hands and lead her back into the living room.

He leant against the wall, eyeing her suddenly shrewdly in a way that made El take a careful step back, eyes narrowed.

'Now for the difficult part. Why should we choose you as a possible roommate?'

El's eyes widened at his unexpected question, biting her lip hard.

What the hell was she supposed to say to that? Oh, sorry, I'm not interested in the apartment. I was just trying to break in to get information on the whereabouts of your roommate who may be being held captive by a psychotic monster as we speak? Yeah, because that's sounds totally sane.

Speak El, she mentally begged herself. Tell him you're don't want to move in. Make up some excuse! Say you we're visiting someone else and stopped to tie your shoe outside their door. Say anything!

'I can cook'.

El blinked, dumbfounded, unable to believe what had just come out of her mouth.

Why the hell did you say that? she yelled at herself silently. What are you doing?

You don't want to move in with complete strangers. They could be total psychos. More than likely will be considering Max's judgement, she thought wryly.

But she couldn't deny the pull she felt deep inside herself, a tugging underneath her ribs that seemed to pull her further into the apartment. Her entire being seemed to scream at her, protesting the very thought of leaving. Some instinct was drawing her to the apartment, and she had learnt to trust her instincts implicitly. She couldn't just leave. She needed to be here.

Dustin's eyes widened to an almost comic size as he gaped at her for a second, before bouncing on the balls of his feet, almost vibrating with excitement.

'Are you serious? I wouldn't have to cook every damn meal? Okay, that's all I need to hear, you are in! When can you get your stuff here?'

El was surprised to find herself resisting the urge to laugh, something she couldn't remember doing in a long time, her lip tugging up into a quick smile at his enthusiasm.

Lucas had said her place was awful, and if she was here she could find information about Max's whereabouts a whole lot quicker. And she liked the place and, surprisingly, she liked Dustin. He so happy and open, completely opposite to her, and seemed like he'd be a fun person to live with.

'I don't have a lot of stuff to bring. I could move in tomorrow if that's okay?'

Dustin gave a loud whoop and rushed towards her, abruptly hugging her tight and swinging her in a wide circle.

Startled, El stiffened in his arms, but Dustin didn't seem to notice as he plopped her back on her feet, grinning at her.

'You're going to be heaps of fun, I can already tell. Welcome to the loft, El!'

El gave him a small, fleeting smile back, long-dormant excitement rising up inside her as she glanced around the apartment again. Her new home.

She honestly couldn't wait.

'It...just happened. Max's room was...persuasive,' she said, shrugging as she finally reached the window, pushing it open with a quick shove.

She purposefully didn't mention the feeling she had had, the one that had drawn her to the apartment, knowing he would think she was insane. Even after everything that they had both seen, Lucas was a complete sceptic.

She threw her leg over the edge of the windowsill and climbed in, thankful for Max's predictable lack of regard for personal safety.
Had she learnt nothing over the years? she thought, shaking her head, exasperated.

El glanced down back over the edge, gulping slightly at how far up she was.

Okay, definitely taking the stairs down, she thought, shuddering. No freaking way am I climbing all the way down there!

'Persuasive? You went there to break in and the guy somehow convinced you to move in. He's not persuasive, he's a freaking genius.'

El rolled her eyes at Lucas, ignoring him as she silently flicked her torch on, shining it around the room. Her lip twitched in amusement as she glanced around the room, listening as Dustin's loud snores came through the wall next door, sounding just like a jackhammer.

The room was messy in typical Max style, her bed un-made and clothes thrown all over the place. El stepped carefully over the piles, trying not to trip in the hazardous space, and walked over to her dresser which was littered with make-up, casettes and hairbands, searching for anything that could tell her where she was, a bus ticket, a map, a note she'd made, anything.

Her eyes fell on something pasted to the mirror, and stilled, breath catching. Hot tears burned at the back of her eyes as she lifted a trembling hand to the mirror and pulled away the polaroid of her and Max laughing, cheeks pressed together as they waved at the person behind the camera, sparkly pink party hats on their heads.

It had been El's last birthday at home, a month before the mission that had changed everything.

El's chin wobbled as she looked down at her best friend's face, guilt settling heavily in her stomach. God, she missed her. She hadn't realised how much until this minute, until she'd seen her face, and remembered the happy times. The times from before.

El shook her head abruptly, jerking herself out of her thoughts, and determinedly blinked back the tears that threatened to spill over.

So not the time for a breakdown, she thought, quickly tucking the photo back and turned back the room. She needed to find whatever she could and get out quick before she got caught.

El turned around, her flashlight lighting up the wall and froze, heart banging painfully against her ribs as her eyes clashed with a pair of icy blue eyes that stared back at her. She gasped, the flashlight slipping from suddenly nerveless fingers as she stumbled backwards, smashing into something with a loud crash.

She vaguely heard Dustin's snores stutter out at the sound before picking up again through the loud buzzing in her ears.

It was him, she thought, shakily, squeezing her eyes shut. The man who had the starring role of all her nightmares, the nightmares which left her waking, screaming, unable to catch her breath and paralysed with remembered fear. The only one they hadn't been able to catch and stop, the only one who had gotten away out of the Bad Men.

Dr. Martin Brenner stared at her, his eyes pinning her in place, frozen in time in a photograph pasted to the corkboard on the wall.
'El, are you okay? What's going on?' Lucas's panicked voice came through the ear-piece, echoing in her ear.

El shivered and opened her eyes, forcing her to look at the man who had destroyed her life.

It's only a picture, she told herself, taking a deep, shuddering breath.

'I'm okay,' she told Lucas, voice shaking as she walked over to the wall, leaning down to the grab the flashlight off the floor as she passed, using it to illuminate the corkboard.

It was covered in photos of Brenner, all in direction locations and from different angles, as well as a thin, red-headed teenager, blue eyes identical to Max's cold and blank. She had pasted maps all over the surface, red texta circling different locations with bright red string linking them, all underlined with dates, time-lines and articles about Brenner, who, it appeared, was now masquerading as a successful businessman.

'This is slightly terrifying', she muttered under her breath, eyes wide as she stared at the corkboard. If it was anything to go by, Max was beyond obsessed. This was so not good.

'What do you see?' Lucas said, tone impatient and a little nervous. El could almost see him glancing at his watch, worried about how she long she'd been there and resisted the urge to roll her eyes.

'Remember how Max got when she was trying to get tickets to Kiss? How obsessed she was?'

El heard Lucas shudder even through the ear-piece.

'How could I forget? That was traumatising.'

'This is worse.'

There was a silence for a moment before Lucas's voice came back through the ear-piece.

'Well...shit'.

El began to rifle through the papers, eyes squinting as she tried to read them in the semi-darkness, before she paused as her hand landed on a small bound book tucked under the piles. She opened it

slowly, flicking through the pages before she came to the very last entrance and felt her heart drop into her stomach, hands beginning to shake.

I found him. I finally found him. I was right when I thought that asshole Brenner had something to do with Jackson's disappearance. I'm going to get him back. No matter what it takes...

'It's Brenner,' she whispered, voice trembling as her breath picked up, 'Brenner has Max's brother.'

Everything went deathly silent except for the crackle of the ear piece, before Lucas's voice filled her ears, shocked.

'Holy shit. Don't tell me Max went after Brenner alone.'

El swallowed hard, turning her head to stare at the photo of her and Max on the mirror, bottom lip trembling as she fought back tears, terrified for her friend, her sister.

'I think she did.'

Notes for the Chapter:

> So...what did everyone think? As always let me know! I love hearing from everyone.
> P.S. Someone we've all been looking forward to seeing is in the next chapter. Can you guess who? ;) - Katie xx

5. Chapter 5

Notes for the Chapter:

> Hey everyone! OMG, here it is. The chapter you've all been waiting for. Ahhh I'm so excited. I can't wait to hear what you think :) Enjoy xx- Katie

Mike slumped into his apartment, body heavy with fatigue, groaning as he rubbed at his gritty tired eyes.

God, he was exhausted, he thought as he peered blearily around the quiet apartment, head pulsing like a bruise, wanting nothing more than to go to bed and sleep for a week.

He had barely slept on the train ride home, dozing in fitful bursts that left him feeling even more drained than before. He hadn't been able to sleep soundly for two weeks. Two long, frustrating weeks of searching for Her that had led to nothing. He was still no closer to an answer than he'd been when he started four years ago.

Where could she be? he thought, running a hand over his face, expression anguished, as he adjusted his bag on his shoulder and walked further into the living room.

Mike didn't know how long he could keep this up without breaking, his frustration and feelings of defeat growing with each day of no progress. He had even called up the soul mark registry to see if her mark had been registered, but there was no record of a mark matching his own, her parents having chosen not to register her at her birth. It had just been another dead-end.

As he passed the kitchen Mike suddenly skidded to a halt, his bag dropping to the floor with a quiet thud as he caught sight of a girl standing in front of the stove, his eyes widening.

Whoa, he thought, throat suddenly dry as he stared at her, suddenly wide awake.

Her body swayed from side to side as she sang quietly to the music

that drifted from the record player sitting on the counter, her voice soft and high, completely oblivious to his presence.

She was the most beautiful girl he'd ever seen. She was tiny, with loose brown curls that fell to her waist in a messy tangle, warm honey brown eyes that lit up as she sang, her pink lips twitching up as they shaped the words in a way that crinkled her up-turned nose. She was wearing a long-sleeved white shirt than fell to her thighs, revealing long smooth legs that he couldn't help but stare at.

Must be one of Dustin's one night stands, he thought, his fist clenching into a fist. He blinked, startled by the fury that roared through him at the thought. What the hell was wrong with him?

El hummed contentedly under her breath along to Bruce Springsteen as he sang about his hungry heart, expertly flipping another pancake on the stove. She turned to grab the plate she had already piled high with pancakes for her and Dustin to share and froze, heart skipping a beat, when she saw the dark-haired boy who stared at her from across the counter.

She dropped her spatula, a high-pitched squeak escaping her throat as she barely bit back the terrified scream that threatened. She pressed a hand to her chest, swallowing back the panic that threatened to rise, her legs suddenly feeling like jelly as her bewildered eyes met his annoyed ones.

El took a careful step back, studying him intently, looking for any sign that he was a threat, barely resisting the urge to reach for the knife block she knew was to her left.

He was tall, so tall she had to crane her head to look up at him, and held his lanky frame awkwardly, reminding her of a giraffe she had once seen in a zoo. His messy ink black hair fell across his forehead, his skin pale with so many freckles spread across his sharp features that it would take her years to count them but somehow suited him. She found herself fascinated by them and the shapes they formed, her fingers itching to trace them. His eyes were the colour of midnight and studied her so intensely it made her insides flutter and squirm strangely, her heart speeding up in her chest.

They stared at each other silently for a long moment, eyes wide, before El cleared her throat, knowing someone needed to speak first.

'Hello,' she said, her voice quiet and soft.

Mike felt a tug deep inside him at her voice and jolted, his eyes widening.

What was that? Who was this girl?

'Uh...hi', he said hesitantly, completely perplexed.

El squinted at him, giving him a searching look as an odd warmth filled her stomach, the tug she had felt when she had first seen the apartment coming to life, pulling inside her, as if trying to lead her towards him. It vibrated and twisted inside her, almost a hum, as if it was...happy?

There was something so achingly familiar about him, something she couldn't quite focus on as it sat just out of reach inside her mind.

'Who are you?' she asked curiously after a few minutes of silence, pulling down the bottom of her shirt self-consciously, trying to get it to cover her suddenly too naked legs as she bit her lip.

Mike glowered at her, crossing his arms over his chest, feeling so frustrated and confused he wanted to pull his hair out.

'Shouldn't that be my question? I live here. What are you doing here?'

El blinked at him, her delicate eyebrows drawing together in confusion.

'So do I. I moved in two weeks ago, but Dustin…he didn't mention another roommate.'

Mike snorted, shaking his head as he ran a hand through his hair, beyond annoyed.

Typical bloody Dustin.

'Of course he didn't', he muttered under his breath, before turning

and stomping down the hall to Dustin's room, banging loudly on the door.

El watched the boy walk away, rubbing her chest absent-mindedly where the tug continued to pull uncomfortably. She winced as he banged on the door, nerves settling in her stomach, twisting her insides.

Well, that went terribly, she thought, hands twisting in front of her anxiously. Why wouldn't Dustin tell her about another room-mate? The other boy, whoever he was, clearly didn't want her living there.

El turned and switched off the stove, no longer wanting breakfast, her stomach churning nauseatingly from the confrontation. The urge to run pounded at her, almost impossible to resist as she leant against the counter, squeezing her eyes shut, trying to calm her racing heart.

Dustin opened the door after a few minutes, and another round of knocking, and looked at Mike blearily in nothing but a pair of blue boxers, his hair sticking up everywhere. He rubbed at his eyes before pausing, a grin spreading across his face, and pulling Mike to him, hugging him so tight that Mike felt his ribs crack.

'Hey, you're back! When did you get in?'

'You invited someone to live here? I was only gone two weeks, Dustin. What the hell were you thinking?' Mike snapped.

Dustin just looked at him for a moment, eyebrows raising to his hairline before he pushed away from the door and walked back into his room, throwing himself back onto his bed with an unbothered yawn.

'Nice to see you too, Mike. And to answer your question, I was thinking we needed someone to help pay the rent while Max is away. El answered the ad and was really cool and could afford the massive rent so I gave her the spare room. What's up your ass?' he asked, tone so even and matter-of-fact Mike felt his anger fading away, leaving him drained and exhausted once more.

Mike sighed heavily, deflating, and slumped down on Dustin's bed

beside him, burying his head in his hands.

'Sorry, you're right, I was being a jerk.'

Dustin laughed and reached over to the slap him on the shoulder.

'Yes, yes you were.'

Mike lifted his head to glare at him and Dustin leant back, hands up in surrender.

'Whoa, dude, calm the death-glare. Only agreeing with you.'

Mike sighed again, tugging on the front of his hair dejectedly.

'It's Her' he said, sitting upright again and gesturing at his wrist, eyes tired.

Dustin's grin fell off his face, eyes widening with understanding.

'Oh.'

Mike nodded, expression grim.

'Yeah. She opened the bond while I was at Mom's, for just a minute. I could tell she was trying to apologise, but then she just threw it back up before I could say anything. I can't get through no matter what I try and I just...I hate it. It's driving me insane,' he groaned, smacking his head back against the wall, flinching as his skull throbbed.

Dustin pressed his lips together thoughtfully, wrapping an arm around Mike's shoulders and shaking him slightly, hating seeing his friend in pain.

They had known each other pretty much their entire lives, and Dustin had been with Mike through the entire soulmate ordeal, from her faked death to her blocking him, and knew how much it hurt Mike, how he tormented himself daily for not being able to save her all those years ago.

'It'll be alright, Mike. She's probably just scared and needs time. From what we read in that article you showed me it sounds like she had a

pretty traumatising childhood. She'll come around eventually.' Dustin said reassuringly, squeezing his shoulder.

Mike stared down at the floor, not meeting his eyes as he pulled at a loose thread in his jeans.

'Will she?' he said quietly, the words not really a question.

He wasn't quite sure anymore. He'd been waiting four years and still had nothing. What if she never opened the bond? What if she didn't want to be with him?

There was a quiet knock at the door and they both turned to look at the girl- El, he reminded himself- hovering in the doorway.

'Hey El!' Dustin said, smiling happily at her in greeting.

His smile dimmed as he noticed the way she was standing stiffly, arms wrapped around herself, face deathly white and eyes wide.

El was barely resisting the urge to keep walking as she saw the other guy staring at her from the corner of her eyes, his expression unreadable.

'I made pancakes if you want them. I just going to get dressed and head out,' she told Dustin quietly, rubbing her arms.

'Why? El, you don't have to go...' Dustin began, confusion filling him as he squinted at her.

Mike felt his stomach clench guiltily at the way she was holding herself, every muscle stiff as if she bracing for a blow, sick at the thought that he had put the fear and anxiety into her eyes.

He had the strangest urge to comfort and had to clench his fists into the bedspread to stop himself from rising to his feet and walking over to pull her into his arms.

El quickly shook her head, arms tightening around herself, avoiding the other boy's eyes as she stared straight at Dustin.

Dustin looked between them, a frown furrowing his forehead as he

saw the guilty expression on Mike's face and the way El was avoiding looking at him, suspicion welling inside him.

'No, it's okay. I need to head to the library and do some research on a paper anyway and you.... you look like you need to talk.'

El glanced at Mike, her eyes meeting his for a second. Mike felt the tug deep inside him again, as if something was trying to pull him towards her.

What the hell was that?

Her eyes skittered away and she quickly walked down the hall away from them to her room. They had barely heard the door click quietly shut before Dustin whirled on him, eyes narrowed.

'What the hell was that about?'

Mike flushed and rubbed at his neck, shame-faced.

'I might...I think I was a bit rude to her before. I didn't expect her to be there and I was in a bad mood...'

Dustin sighed, shaking his head, his curls bouncing. He was used to Mike's mood swings, usually gone as quick as they came, but he knew El would have taken it to heart and was probably completely freaked out.

'Uncool man', Dustin said, looking at him, exasperated, pointing towards the door. 'You really need to apologise. Like now. El's cool but she's....fragile. She doesn't deal well with confrontation'.

Dustin had noticed over the weeks they'd been living together how nervous El could be, jumping at loud noises and stiffening whenever they accidentally touched. She was very private and said little about her life, but Dustin knew something must have happened to her in the past to make her this way. He didn't ask her about it though, respecting her right for privacy. Everyone had their secrets, himself included.

Mike groaned, running a hand through hair, pushing it into his face.

'Don't make me feel worse! I know I do. I'll go now before she leaves'.

Mike rose to his feet and quickly walked to the doorway, intending to do just that. He paused in the door, turning and looking back at Dustin, a frown on his face.

'You need to get some clothes on. There is another girl living here now.'

Dustin shook his head, smiling smugly, as he casually laid back on the bed, arms tucked behind his head.

'Nah, it's all good. El and I already talked about it. Underwear is fine, naked isn't.'

'Oh my god, please tell me you weren't naked in front of her?' Mike asked, gaping at him in disbelief.

He was freaking shameless.

Dustin shrugged nonchalantly.

'Only once. She was cool about it.'

Mike huffed out an exasperated breath, shaking his head.

'Bloody hell,' he muttered under his breath as he walked out, heading to her room.

He paused in front of it for a second before knocking lightly, shifting anxiously as he waited for her to answer.

'Come in'.

Mike took a deep breath, opening the door quickly before he lost his nerve. He stood awkwardly in the doorway, watching as she bustled about the room, shoving books and notes into her backpack without looking up. But he knew, from the way her shoulders tensed and rose to her ears that she knew who was standing in the doorway.

'Uh...hey. I just wanted to...to say sorry about earlier. I was really rude.'

'It's fine', El said, not glancing up as she wrapped a bright red scarf around her neck, hands shaking slightly.

Mike's heart ached as he watched her, guilt settling heavily inside him.

'No, it's not', Mike continued determinedly, 'I really am sorry....'

He trailed off as he glanced around her room, eyes widening in shock.

What the...?

The room was almost as empty as it had been before she had moved in. The only thing that had changed was the boxes piled against the far wall, overflowing with clothes and books, and the heap of blankets and a pillow that lay on the floor by the window.

'Where's your bed?' he blurted out, frowning at the pile of blankets, eyebrows drawing together in confusion.

El felt the blood rush to her cheeks as she flushed, ducking her head and keeping her eyes fixed on the floor as she grabbed her bag from off the floor beside her, feeling small and ashamed.

'I don't have one,' she muttered under her breath, shoulders curling in as she squeezed past him. She walked fast, the need to get away from there overwhelming.

Mike's stomach dropped as he saw her face, horror filling him as he realised his mistake. He shook his head panickily, feeling like an even bigger jerk as she hurried out the room.

'No... shit.... I'm sorry, I didn't mean...'

But she was already gone, the front door shutting behind her as he turned around.

'Shit', he groaned, running a hand over his face.

Dustin came to the doorway, and leant against it, eyebrows raised.

'That was hard to watch', he said, taking a bite of pancakes from the plate he was holding in one hand.

Mike groaned again, closing his eyes and kicking the doorframe, cursing as his foot pulsed.

'I know!'

Argh, what the hell was he going to do? She probably thought he was a complete asshole, and he really didn't blame her. He'd really screwed this up.

Mike straightened as he suddenly remembered something, an idea forming in his mind and he turned to look at Dustin.

'I have an idea, but I'm going to need your help.'

**

El peered into the apartment, and breathed a sigh of relief when she saw the living room was empty.

She dumped her bag by the front door and walked to her room, unable to remember a time she'd been more tired. She passed Dustin in the kitchen with a distracted wave, some delicious smell wafting from the oven making her stomach growl, reminding her she had forgotten to eat again.

It had been a long, frustrating and emotionally draining day. They were still no closer to finding Max, every lead seeming to be a dead-end. She'd helpfully not specified which location Brenner was using, and now they were having to try and track down every one she'd taken note of to try and find her. But so far, there was no sign of her. So not only did El have to deal with that, but now she had to come home and deal with a room-mate who clearly didn't want her living there and was probably going to hate her.

It's going to be a great few weeks, she thought, bitterly, as she walked across the room, pushing her mass of curls back as she opened the door to her room.

El stopped in the doorway and stared, unable to believe what she was

seeing. She blinked once, and then twice, to see if she was imagining but no, it was there.

A single bed sat in the middle of her room, freshly made up with pristine white sheets, a blue comforter that she'd never seen before and a pillow that was so fluffy it looked like she would sink right into it.

El walked slowly into the room and stood at the end, running her hand reverently over the bottom of the frame, as her eyes filled with tears.

She hadn't had a bed, a real bed, since she'd left home. She'd been sleeping on the floor or the lumpy old couch she'd found at a flea market for so long she'd forgotten what a real mattress felt like. Who would've done this?

Mike watched her from the doorframe, having heard her come in after hours of waiting for her to come home. His eyes softened as he watched her run her hands over the comforter, before speaking, not wanting her to turn around and freak out at finding him there.

'We didn't know where you'd want it so we left it there'.

El spun around and stared at him, quickly reaching up to wipes her eyes, self-conscious, as she sniffled.

'You did this?' she asked, hating how her voice cracked, not wanting him to see her this vulnerable.

Pathetic, El, she groaned internally.

'Uh,', Mike said, shifting nervously.

What if she was mad? he thought worriedly, before nodding, lifting his head to meet her eyes.

'Yeah. It came with the apartment, just a spare, so we didn't buy it or anything', he told her, shrugging as if it was no big deal.

It had taken them almost two hours to get it down from the crawl space above the hall, two hours with a lot of grumbling and scrapped

fingers on both sides but they'd done it. It suddenly seemed worth it as El looked down at the bed in awe.

'Why?' El asked, eyes now dry and face curious as she tilted her head at him, studying him intensely.

She thought he didn't like her. Why would he set up a bed for her?

Mike squirmed under her intense gaze, feeling strangely exposed, like she could read his every thought and knew everything inside him.

'I... I felt really bad about this morning and wanted it to make it up to you. And...no-one should have to sleep on the floor.'

Mike remembered the pile of sheets and blankets he'd picked up earlier that day and barely held back a shudder, horror filling him again.

There was just something not right about her sleeping on the cold floor. He felt sick by the very thought of it.

Warmth filled her honey brown eyes as she looked at him, making them even brighter, as she sat on the bed, pushing off the floor with her feet and bouncing slightly.

Mike's eyes widened in alarm and he stepped forward quickly, hand held out.

'I wouldn't do that! I'm not sure we got all the screws in properly', he said, expression slightly embarrassed as he scratched the back of his neck nervously, not wanting her to get hurt.

El had to bite back a laugh at the panic on his face, not wanting to hurt his feelings. She purposely kept her face blank as she pulled a small tendril of her powers up and tightened any loose screws.

She gave another bounce and noticed that the small squeak she'd heard earlier was now gone.

'Feels pretty stable to me', El told him, lifting her eyes to his.

Mike blinked at her for a second, before his lip twitched into a

crooked smile, looking away bashfully.

'You didn't have to do this, you know', she said, still not quite believing he had.

She knew she should probably be mad that he'd invaded her privacy but she couldn't muster up the feeling. She was just too happy and grateful.

Mike shook his head, face suddenly serious as he stepped closer to the bed.

'Yeah, I did. Everyone deserves a bed. And Dustin...he said I was a bit of jerk to you this morning. Was I?'

El shrugged, rising to her feet and standing up in front of him, craning her head to meet his eyes.

'A little. But that's okay. I probably would have reacted the same way if I found a strange half-naked girl in my kitchen.

Mike laughed.

'How about we start over then? Hi, I'm Mike.'

El looked at him for a second, her eyes tracing his face in a way that made him want to squirm, before shaking his hand, feeling a warmth spread through her stomach at his touch.

'El Hopper.'

'Nice to meet you, El', Mike said, eyes warming.

They stood there in silence for a few seconds, shifting awkwardly, before they both opened their mouths, speaking at the same time.

'I'll just...'

'I just want...'

They both paused, looking at each other sheepishly before Mike laughed and gestured at her to continue.

'You first.'

'I just wanted to say thank you. For the bed. It...it means a lot,' El said, tucking a curl behind her ear as her lips curved up into a bright smile, the first one he'd ever seen from her.

Mike's smile froze on his face, his stomach clenching as he watched the smile transform her face, lighting up her eyes in a way that left him breathless.

Oh shit, he thought, heart racing as he just stared at her.

No, this could not be happening. He had a soulmate out there, one he'd been waiting for for so long. He couldn't be attracted to be a girl now!

'I... Dustin's making lasagne if...if you want to come out and eat...' Mike stuttered, before turning and practically running out of the room.

El watched him walk quickly from the room, her eyebrows drawing together in confusion at his abrupt departure, before shrugging and turning back to the bed.

She grinned and threw herself onto it, bouncing twice before she settled into the middle of her. She felt herself sink into the soft mattress, and groaned at how comfortable it was, burying her face into the pillow and breathing in the smell of lemon that clung to the cotton with a wide smile.

Maybe she'd been wrong about Mike after all.

Notes for the Chapter:

> What did everyone think? Please please let me know!!! I can't wait for all the awesome reviews xx

6. Chapter 6

Notes for the Chapter:

> Hey everyone! As promised, the next chapter! OMG, I was completely blown away by the amount of reviews I got on the last chapter. I'm so glad you all liked their meeting! I promise there are so many more Mileven moments to come :) This chapter is a little shorter than the previous ones but I still hope you like it xx

Over the next few weeks, they all became fast friends. Almost every minute they weren't studying- Mike studying engineering and Dustin IT- or sleeping they were together, watching movies, playing board games, and just having fun. Mike had been stunned to discover El was a major Star Wars and Star Trek fan, and had knowledge of D & D that almost rivalled his own.

El found herself smiling and laughing more and more, and, to her astonishment, slowly healing, getting healthier with every day. She was putting on weight quickly, mostly curtsey of Dustin's amazing cooking skills and the three meals a day they both made sure she ate, as well as the endless amounts of Eggos they'd stocked the freezer with when they found out it was her favourite food. he also rarely had nightmares anymore, as if something about living with the boys kept them at bay, protecting her from them.

Mike noticed that El kept strange hours, always looking at papers and researching. She disappeared at odd hours of the night, as well as the day, always going for runs early every morning before he was even awake for classes. When he had asked Dustin about it, he had just shrugged at him, unworried, and gave him the excuse that El had told him when he'd asked- she was studying like just they were.

One night, almost six weeks after El had moved in, Dustin was begging El to come out to the arcade with them, something El was stubbornly refusing to do.

'Come on, El, you never go out', he whined as he tugged her out of

her room, pulling her further and further out despite her half-hearted struggles.

'I do so!' El said, dragging her feet, expression long-suffering as she turned begging eyes on Mike who stood in the kitchen, silently asking for help.

Mike shrugged at her as if to say 'what can you do?', his expression amused.

El narrowed her eyes at him, silently promising revenge, as she snatched her arm away from Dustin and ran to the couch, curling up and watching him, eyes wary, as she held a pillow in front of her like a shield.

'Going to classes doesn't count', Dustin said, coming over to stand in front of her, hands on his hips.

El pulled a face at him, scrunching her nose, disgruntled.

Mike shook his head, snorting out a laugh at El's expression, leaning against the counter.

'Dustin, leave her alone. If she doesn't want to go you can't make her.'

'You're no help, Mike', Dustin said, shooting him a mock-betrayed look, hand on his heart, before he threw himself backwards onto the couch. El hurriedly laid her legs down flat so he wouldn't smack his head against her knees, letting it land in her lap.

Dustin looked up at her, pouting, expression deliberately pathetic as he gave her puppy dog eyes.

'Come on, El, it'll be fun! There's heaps of games and we can all grab dinner. We don't have any food here anyways. Mike burnt whatever he was making.'

They both turned on the couch to look over at him and watched as Mike blushed, glowering at Dustin as he crossed his arms over his chest defensively.

'It's not burnt. It's just a little crispy.'

Dustin raised an eyebrow at him, scoffing.

'Mike, it's practically ash.'

Mike glanced down at the open oven, where a burnt mass sat still smoking slightly, and sighed before chuckling weakly.

'You may be right.'

El stifled a laugh behind her hand, a slight giggle escaping.

Mike looked towards her, his eyes suddenly deliberately soft and pleading, pouting slightly. El narrowed her eyes at him, shaking her head slowly as she pointed a finger at him.

'Oh no. I know what you're doing and it's not going to work, Wheeler.'

'It *would* be a lot more fun if you came too, El'.

El groaned, closing her eyes, letting out an irritated huff.

'Neither of you are going to stop bugging till I agree, are you?' she asked, opening one eye to look at Mike who shrugged, grinning at her.

'Probably not.'

'So... what do you say, El?' Dustin asked, looking up at her from her lap.

El rolled her eyes as they both stared at her with identical begging expressions, throwing her hands up into the air in defeat.

'Fine, I'll go'.

'YES!' Dustin crowed, fist pumping the air before he jumped off the couch, yanking her up with him, 'Let's go.'

They all climbed into Mike's car, the only one of them who had one, and drove the ten minutes downtown to the arcade as the sun set in the distance.

As they walked into the arcade El looked around with wide, fascinated eyes at the bright colours, lights and loud noises coming from all the different machines lining the walls of the huge room, as well as the various table games that sat in the corners. The smell of fries and burgers hung in the air, coming from behind the counter at the very back of the room, making her stomach grumble.

'So, El, what's your favourite game?' Dustin asked, rubbing his hands together, eyes bright with excitement.

El shrugged, looking around and feeling completely overwhelmed by all the choices.

'I don't know. I've never been to an arcade before.'

Both Mike and Dustin halted in place, turning to stare at her, gaping in disbelief.

'What? You're kidding me, right?' Mike asked, mouth hanging open as his dark eyes widened.

El shook her head, taking a cautious step back at the slightly wild look in both their eyes.

'Oh my god! You seriously have to try everything then,' Dustin said, running ahead of them and claiming the ice hockey table, grabbing the puck and brandishing it in front of him like a weapon.

El giggled while Mike laughed, shaking his head at Dustin before they both followed him over.

They rushed around for the next two hours playing ice-hockey, space-invaders, shooting games and even the claw machine, where Mike won a giraffe he gave to El, who loved it and immediately named it Eggo. Her favourite game was PacMan and the boys had to drag her away from the game to eat.

They all ordered burgers for dinner and ate them ravenously, barely speaking or stopping for breath. El glanced around as she chewed, watching the younger children playing on the various machines and frowned as she saw a sign on a door in the corner of the room, not understanding the words written on it, as a bunch of kids ran out

wearing lit up vests.

'What is laser tag?' she asked curiously and both boys looked up, surprised, before Mike smiled.

'Oh right, you wouldn't have played laser tag before. It's...well, it's like playing tag as kids where you chase them and if you catch them they're out of the game. But with laser tag you have guns...fake guns', Mike explained quickly when he saw El's widen with panic, 'that shoot laser beams. There are two teams and you shoot the light-up vests of the other team to knock out their lights, and the team that takes out the most members wins.'

El's lit up at his explanation and bounced in her chair excitedly as the boys laughed at her eagerness. She jumped up, her half-eaten burger abandoned and grabbed the boy's arms, dragging them up and towards the door.

She knew she'd be good at this game.

'Let's play.'

Ten minutes later Mike was rushing through the dark, shadowy arena, heart racing as sweat ran down his forehead and neck, soaking his hair. He heard the pow of guns behind him getting louder and started to pant, his eyes darting around for a place to hide.

He backed away slowly, hearing the distinct noise of footsteps coming closer, and held his gun up, ready to shoot on sight. His heart skipped a beat as he suddenly crashed into a tiny warm body behind him, feeling them jolt and almost fall over.

He swung around, gun pointed at the person and froze as he recognised El staring up at him, her own curls a wild mess around her face, eyes wide. He quickly lowered his gun and smiled at her sheepishly. El returned his smile, breathing hard, as she leant on her knees to catch her breath.

The pow of a gun close to their left made them both still, exchanging a look before El silently grabbed Mike's arm and dragged him into an alcove he'd somehow missed, ducking behind the wall.

Mike peeked out the corner of the wall, laughing quietly as he saw the group of kids they'd heard walk right past them, muttering about how they swore they had heard someone.

'I think we're safe...' he began, the words getting caught in his suddenly dry throat as he turned and found himself inches from El, so close their noses almost brushed.

He swallowed hard, eyes wide as he stared into her wide brown eyes as she smiled, not understanding why he was suddenly so nervous.

'Um...'

Mike jumped as a familiar pow noise shattered the silence between them, echoing in the small space.

His eyes widened as he felt a nudge against his front, and glanced down to see his vest light out, El's gun pressed firmly against the middle of his stomach.

What the....

He lifted his head back to El's face, gaping as he saw she was wearing the enemy vest, shining bright red instead of the blue his had been only seconds before.

El looked at him, barely biting a smile that threatened to erupt on her face.

'You!' he gasped in disbelief.

El finally grinned, letting out a slight giggle escape as she ran out of the alcove, stopping at the entrance to the next room to wink at him, her brown eyes warm and bright with amusement.

'Sorry, Mike. But this is war,' she said, letting out a loud whoop as she ran out into the throng towards the sound of gunfire, disappearing from view.

Mike stared after her, mouthing open and closing, his body thrumming with something he didn't recognise. He didn't realise he was grinning until his cheeks began to ache.

Dustin came up beside him, puffing loudly, his face red with exertion. He glanced at Mike's vest and let out a loud groan.

'Great', he said, shaking his head. He frowned in confusion as he saw the way Mike was grinning, waving a hand in front of his face until he blinked and turned to look at him.

'What's with you?' he asked, bewildered.

Mike shook his head, unable to keep the smile off his face, as he glanced again in the direction El had gone.

'I have no idea.'

Notes for the Chapter:

> So what did everyone think? As always let me know...getting reviews just make my day xx

7. Chapter 7

Notes for the Chapter:

> Hey everyone! OMG, I can't believe this story already has over 1000 hits!!! This is crazy. Thank you so much for all the amazing reviews again. I've been having a couple of bad days so all you're lovely responses have really been helping :) Hope you like the next chapter- Katie xx

Mike walked in after a long day of classes and froze in the doorway, blinking in disbelief, stunned by what he was seeing.

The apartment was a complete mess. Almost all the dining chairs were knocked over, the table had been moved halfway across the room, the couches were eschew, and there were cushions from the couch all over the floor.

The sound of hysterical laughter caught his attention and he turned to see El balancing on the back of the couch giggling loudly, her cheeks flushed with exertion. Dustin was standing on the arm of the same couch, arms locked with hers as they wrestled, grunting, his face almost purple as he strained to push her off the couch.

Amused, Mike cleared his throat. They both froze, and turned to look at him like deer caught in the headlights. Mike just grinned, leaning against the wall, lips pressed together to keep from laughing.

El bit her lip, cheeks flushing even redder than he'd ever seen it, waving at him sheepishly.

'Hey Mike.'

Dustin grinned at him goofily, his eyes glassy and a little unfocused.

'Hey buddy!'

'What are you two doing?' Mike asked, pushing off from the wall and coming to stand in front of them, eyes wide as he surveyed the chaos.

'The floor is lava', El said cheerfully, reaching out and giving Dustin a hard shove. He wobbled, arms flailing in panic before he steadied himself by grabbing the back of the couch. He gave a sigh of relief and then narrowed his eyes at El.

'Cheater'.
El shrugged, expression slightly smug as she wiggled down from her crouched position and sat on the edge of the couch.

Dustin turned back to Mike, almost buzzing with excitement.

'El's never played, can you believe that? So I thought I'd show her but make it more interesting so...ta-da! The adult version of the floor is lava,' he said, gesturing widely at the coffee table overflowing with cups filled with beer, a bottle of vodka and shot-glasses.

'If you fall off you have to drink and answer any question you're asked.'

'I'm winning,' El told him, smirking. She had been secretly using her powers to win, putting more strength behind her shoves and helping her to balance.

'Clearly,' Mike said, laughing and jerking his chin in Dustin's direction where he swayed on the couch, eyes glassy and bloodshot.

'Hey! It's not my fault. She's ridiculously strong. It's kind of scary,' Dustin said, side-eyeing her suspiciously and El's widened her eyes at him, as if to say 'what', expression deliberately innocent.

'Want to play?' El asked, eyes on his as she pushed her hair out of her face and bounded away from Dustin, barely making it to the cushions spread across the ground.

'Yeah, Mike, play with us', Dustin said, jumping onto one of the kitchen chairs from the couch, almost knocking it over and taking him with it before he righted himself.

Mike watched them laughing, his eyes following El as she jumped from cushion to cushion around the room and quickly dropped his bag on the floor.

Why the hell not? he thought, jumping up onto the other couch.

They played for the next two hours, pushing and shoving each other playfully, unable to control their laughter as Dustin and Mike continued to fall to the floor over and over. Only El managed to stay on the furniture, good-naturedly teasing them from wherever she was perched.

El jumped from the couch to the armchair, a huge smile spreading across her face, unable to remember a time when she had had more fun. She landed easily, rising to her full height but stumbled when she was knocked backwards by another body colliding with hers.

She lifted surprised eyes to Mike's dark ones, both jumping for the same piece of furniture without noticing the other. They clung to each other's arms for balance, both trying desperately trying not to fall. As they moved in closer their bodies pressed against each other, her breasts squishing against Mike's chest, causing matching colour to rush into both their faces.

Not meeting his eyes, El quickly tried to pull away, her heart racing so fast in her chest she felt nauseous. Her eyes widened as she began to totter off the edge of the couch, arms flailing. Mike panickily reached for her, trying to grab her arm but she fell off the couch, landing with a loud thump on her butt.

'Shit, are you okay?' Mike asked, worriedly, knelling down on the couch and holding a hand out to her.

El blinked up at him, stunned, before she burst out laughing, leaning back on her elbows as tears of mirth filled her eyes.

Mike watched her for a second before laughing himself, grabbing her hand and helping her to her feet.

'YES! Go, Mike. It's about bloody damn time it was your turn El', Dustin crowed triumphantly.

El mock-glared at him, rubbing her butt with a muttered 'Ow', before turning and grabbing a cup of beer.

She wrinkled her nose as she looked at it, glancing at Dustin and

Mike who just raised their eyebrows, waiting. She sighed, before plugging her nose and chugging down the putrid liquid as they both cheered her on.

'Eugh,' she groaned, making a face at the taste and wiping her mouth with her sleeve.

'Okay, questions', Dustin said eagerly, clapping his hands as he sat down on the kitchen chair he was balancing on, thinking hard.

'Okay, I got one. El...who was your first kiss?' he asked, wiggling his eyebrows at her.

El let out an embarrassed moan, covering her face with one hand before chuckling.

'Oh, god...' she let out a loud breath before lowering her hand and facing them both, 'Okay, I was sixteen and it was with my friend, Will. It was over in like two seconds and it sucked. Big time', El said, cringing as she remembered it and how utterly wrong it had felt for both of them.

It was something they joked about all the time and Lucas and Max had never let them live down.

'So you guys clearly didn't end up together', Dustin said, amused.

'Well, it turns out I'm not exactly his type'.

When they just blinked at her, confused, El threw her head back and laughed.

'He's gay', she explained.

'Oh...right,' Mike said, shaking his head and laughing sheepishly.

They kept playing until they got too tipsy and Mike almost broke his leg trying to jump over the coffee table onto the other couch. They instead decided to play a mixture of Never Have I Ever and twenty questions while they waited for the pizza they had ordered to arrive, wanting to soak up the alcohol.

They lay back on the couch, laughing and sipping beers slowly as they all took turns asking questions.

'Never have I ever worn handcuffs', Mike said, turning to look pointedly at Dustin, knowing he'd been caught in handcuffs by his ex-girlfriend's mother at one point.

Dustin groaned, glaring at him and took a long sip of his beer. They almost didn't notice El trying to sneak a sip past them and both whirled to stare at her, stunned.

'What?' Mike asked, gaping at her.

El shrugged, smirking at them, refusing to comment as she waved at Dustin to ask his question.

'Okay, what is your most embarrassing moment?' Dustin asked drowsily, lying back on the couch and pulling his cap over his forehead, looking like he was minutes from falling asleep.

Mike rolled his eyes at the lame question.

'Well, you already know mine so...', he said to Dustin before turning to tell El, cheeks flushing bright red as he remembered the most mortifying moment of his life, 'I was trying to sneak out to this party by climbing down the roof when I was seventeen. I got my foot caught in the roof gutter and my parents found me hanging there twenty minutes later when they heard the banging from me trying to get free and thought it was a robber. I was grounded for months!'

El giggled as she raised an eyebrow at him, crossing her arms over her chest.

'That's nothing. I was playing truth or dare with my friends and I was dared to do a nudey run. So, of course, I did, which would've been fine except my foster dad was outside having a smoke and caught me mid-streak.. We couldn't look each other in the eye for a month,' El said, shuddering as she remembered how Hopper and her had avoided each other, both their faces a permanent shade of pink for weeks.

Mike sat up abruptly, head spinning dizzily at the quick movement,

focusing on the information El had just revealed.

'Wait, you were in the foster system?'

El stiffened, all the colour draining from her face as she realised what she'd just revealed. She tugged on the end of her hair, avoiding his eyes as she nodded stiffly.

'Yeah. My Mom...she killed herself when I was twelve. I didn't have any other relatives so I was put into foster care.' El said quietly.

El hated lying but she knew she had no other choice. She couldn't tell them the truth, not if she wanted to stay here or keep them safe. And she wasn't entirely lying. She had searched for her mother after she'd joined Hopper and found out her mother had killed herself three years after she'd been taken. After she'd given up all hope of ever finding her daughter alive.

'You've never told me that', Dustin said, making them both jump as he sat up straighter on the couch, now fully awake as he looked at her, expression uncharacteristically serious.

El shrugged, lip twitching up into a sad smile, laying her head back against the arm rest of the couch.

'I don't like to talk about it. Some of the places I was in…. the people weren't very nice'.

It was true. El stubbornly refused to think about what they'd done to her and the horrors she'd seen in the place that had been her prison for six years. She liked to pretend that it had never happened to her, that it was something she had imagined or seen in a horror film. But she couldn't pretend in her dreams…couldn't escape the nightmarish images that continued to plague her.

Mike's chest tightened as he watched her, devastated at the thought of what she must have gone through. He could tell from her face that those people, whoever they were, had hurt her. It explained so much about El, like why she kept a light on in her room when she slept, why she sometimes jumped at loud noises and why she sometimes seemed so sad.

'I'm sorry'.

El shrugged, face carefully blank, though she couldn't quite hide the hurt and pain shining in her eyes.

'It's okay. It was a long time ago. And the people I ended up with...' El said, a small smile curving her lips as she thought of her family, 'Joyce and Hopper are just amazing. They have five other kids that live with them, plus two of their own, and we just became a family. Crazy and dysfunctional, but we love each other.'

'You sound like you miss them,' Mike said quietly, eyes soft as he saw her own grow sad and faraway.

El blinked, her eyes swinging to his and nodded after a moment, pressing her lips together to keep them from trembling.

'I do. I miss them a lot. We don't exactly talk anymore'.

Mike frowned.

'Why?'

'It's complicated...'

The doorbell rang, making them both jolt and turn to stare at the door, surprised. They had been so focused on each other they had lost track of everything else.

'Pizza! I'll go down and grab it,' Dustin said, jumping to his feet and stumbling slightly before he righted himself with a triumphant grin. He swayed over to the counter, grabbing a few crinkled notes out of the jar used for takeout and walked out, closing the front door behind him with a loud bang.

Mike rose to his feet when he left and walked over to sit beside El, looking at her silently for a moment as she stared at the floor, wringing her fingers in her lap.

'Why don't you call them?' he asked, voice gentle.

'I'm pretty sure they won't want to talk to me.' she said, her voice

small and wet as she curled her legs up into her chest, shoulders folding inwards.

Mike shook his head, confused.

'Why would you think that?'

'When I... when I moved out I left kind of quickly. I was going through something, and I didn't really give them an explanation. I just left and I hurt them a lot.'

El looked away, eyes dark and glassy as she fiddled with the bottom of her shirt.

She didn't understand why she was telling him any of this, opening up in a way that she hadn't ever, not even with Max who she trusted with her life. But there was just something about Mike, something that told her she could tell him anything, that he would never judge her.

Mike's stomach clenched as to watched her, fighting the urge to pull her into his arms, hating seeing her this sad and defeated when he already knew, even after only a few weeks of knowing her, that El was anything but.

Before he knew what he was doing Mike reached over and took her hand in his, heart racing as he slipped his fingers between her cold ones.

El jumped, turning startled brown eyes to his, her heart speeding up as she saw the way he was looking at her, dark eyes soft and searching hers tenderly.

Friends don't look at each other like that...do they?

Mike felt blood rush to his cheeks but pointedly ignored it, sliding his thumb along hers, back and forth, comfortingly. El squirmed slightly, her insides clenching as his touch left a blaze of heat along her skin.

'Trust me, they'll want to talk to you. Call them'.

El nodded, unable to look after from his dark gaze, her cheeks

flushing pink.

Mike's eyes dropped to her lips before darting back to hers, his breath shuddering out as he saw her eyes darken slightly. He didn't understand the hunger that rose inside him, the sudden urge to press his lips to hers almost overwhelming.

El's eyes widened at the sudden considering look in his eyes, her breath hitching as he began to lean towards her, his breath fanning across her face. El found herself moving closer to him, her eyes beginning to drift shut before...

'I got pizza!' Dustin yelled as he burst back into the apartment. He paused in the doorway as he watched them pull away from each other, snatching their hands back guiltily as if they'd touched something hot, faces aflame.

Dustin looked at the both for a long moment, squinting, before his lips pulled up into a smirk.

'Hungry?'

Mike's cheeks darkened even more as he recognised the double meaning of Dustin's question and narrowed his eyes at him warningly. He quickly jumped to his feet, movements jerky and nervous as he walked over to the kitchen table to grab a slice, avoiding El's baffled gaze from the couch.

El rose to her feet slowly and followed him, shaking her head dazedly.

Had they...did Mike almost kiss her? Had that really happened?

She glanced at him as he put slices of pizza on his plate, his cheeks now they're normal pale shade as he joked with Dustin, and sighed.

Guess not, she thought, dejectedly picking up some pizza and chewing quietly, a pang of sadness she didn't understand filling her as she leant against the table.

Mike flicked El a look and swallowed as he saw her far off expression, throat dry and tight.

He had almost kissed El! What the hell was he thinking? It would have made everything so awkward. God, he was such an idiot!
Nothing could ever happen between them like that. He had soulmate, it wouldn't be fair on El. Thank god, Dustin interrupted them, he thought, running a hand through his hair with a quiet sigh.

Then why are you so disappointed? a little voice in his head said, tone smug, and he inwardly groaned, resisting the urge to smack his head against the nearest wall, wishing he had an answer.

Notes for the Chapter:

> What did everyone think? As always please let me know. I love hearing from you xx

8. Chapter 8

Notes for the Chapter:

> Hey everyone! As promised here's the next chapter! This one is heaps longer than the last two so I really hope you enjoy it!- Katie x

Mike rushed around the apartment, hurriedly pulling a shirt over his head, and panickily shoving any textbook he could find into his bag, silently praying one of them would be the book he needed.

Shit, I'm going to be so late, he thoughts as he pushed the door of the bathroom open despite the running shower that showed it was currently occupied. He knew Dustin wouldn't mind him coming in for a few minutes.

He quickly grabbed his toothbrush out of it's holder, slicking on some toothbrush and began to brush his teeth frantically.

'Sorry, Dustin,' he said as he spat into the sink, keeping his eyes on the mirror, 'I'm running late and couldn't wait.'

Mike froze, every muscle in his body stiffening in panic as a voice replied. A voice that was way too feminine and high to be Dustin's.

'It's fine...but....it's not Dustin'.

Mike choked on the toothpaste in his mouth, eyes widening to an almost comical width as El's voice came through the shower curtain, sounding amused.

'Shit, El...I'm sorry, I swear I didn't see anything...I mean, not that there isn't anything to see...not that I wanted to...or didn't want to. I'll just leave...' he babbled, horrified, seconds from running out the door, his cheeks feeling like they were on fire.

El giggled quietly as she pulled back the shower curtain, holding it to her chest as she peeked out at him, her eyelashes wet and clumped together.

She took in his panicked expression and full-on laughed, shaking her head.

'Mike, breathe, it's fine. I don't mind you being in here,' she said, crinkling her nose at him, eyes bright with amusement, before she ducked back behind the curtain.

Mike quickly took a deep, shuddering breath, not realising until that moment that he'd been holding it, and tried not to think of the fact that there was a very naked El less than two feet away from him. Or imagine it.

Ever since their almost kiss almost a week ago, Mike had been drawn to El more and more, wanting to spend almost every waking minute with her. The need was....uncontrollable and so strong he couldn't resist it. He just couldn't seem to stay away. And, in truth, he really didn't want to.

He squeezed his eyes shut for a second, heart hammering in his chest, before opening them and continued to brush his teeth, definitely not noticing that he could see the outline of her naked body moving behind the curtain.

I should leave. I should definitely leave. Like...right now, he thought, but he couldn't drag himself away, his feet refusing to move him from his spot.

The door suddenly slammed open making Mike jump guiltily, eyes wide as he fumbled his toothbrush, dropping it into the sink with a quiet clink.

Dustin walked into the small room, yawning, in a pair of jeans and rumpled red hoody, his curly hair flat on one side from lying on it all night.

He squeezed past Mike to the sink, turning on the tap and splashing his face, before grabbing his toothbrush.

'Hey Mike. Morning El!' he said, voice muffled around his toothbrush.

El chuckled as she turned off the shower, reaching out and grabbing a white towel off the rack before wrapping it around herself.

'Morning Dustin. There's a fresh pot of coffee in the kitchen,' she said as she stepped out of the tub, dripping onto the fluffy blue mat.

Dustin groaned in appreciation, spitting out the toothpaste and rinsing his mouth.

'You're an angel', he said, leaning over and giving her a quick kiss on the temple, as El pushed him away playfully, rolling her eyes.

'You say that everything morning.'

'You make coffee every morning.'

Mike gaped at her, barely hearing their conversation, his eyes darkening as he looked at her.

God, she was gorgeous. Her hair was piled on top of her head, the curls even tighter from the steam, her cheeks rosy and the top of her chest flushed from the heat of the shower. His eyes traced the droplets that were running down her skin, disappearing beneath the cotton of the towel held just below the swell of her breasts, biting back a groan at the sight, unable to tear his eyes away.

El turned her head, her eyes locking with his, and felt herself shiver under his hungry gaze, her breath hitching in her throat. She bit her lip, suddenly over-heated and flushed in a way that had nothing to do with the shower, feeling like he was running his fingers over her skin instead of just his eyes.

Since they're almost kiss on the couch a week ago, every accidental touch, every brush of his fingers or his eyes on her made her very skin feel electrified, like she was going to combust. She was aware of him in a way she had never been any other man. She didn't know what was happening to her but she definitely didn't want it to stop.

El grinned, winking at him as a flush moved up her chest and into her cheeks, before turning and walking out of the bathroom to go and get dressed.

Mike stared after her, a goofy smile on his face. He didn't even hear Dustin speaking to him until he waved a hand in front of his face, making him jolt. Mike shook his head to drag his wandering mind

back, blushing bright red as he realised how obvious he was being. God, he'd been checking out El in front of Dustin.

Dustin laughed, shaking his head at him.

'Smooth, Mike, real smooth. Why don't you just tell her you like her?'

Mike jerkily cleaned his toothbrush and shoved it back in it's holder, deliberately not meeting Dustin's eyes, his stomach pitching and turning uncomfortably with guilt and embarrassment.

'I wasn't even looking...and I don't like her. Not like that!'

Dustin sent him a sceptical look, eyes bright with amusement, reaching over to ruffle Mike's hair.

'Uh-huh, sure. Is that why you tried to kiss her the other night? Cause you don't like her?'

Mike just gaped at him, blood rushing to his cheeks. Shit, he knew Dustin was going to bring that up!

'I...uh...we didn't...I...I'm not having this conversation,' he muttered, walking fast from the room, the tips of his ears bright red, cheeks burning.

'Denial, total denial,' Dustin sang after him, laughing loudly.

Mike quickly grabbed his bag off the hook on his bedroom door and walked fast to the front door, wanting to get out before Dustin raced after him and made him admit something he hadn't admitted to himself yet.

He yanked open the door and almost barrelled into the dark-skinned boy standing on the other side, his hand raised in a fist, ready to knock.

They stared at each for a long moment, Mike frowning as he waited impatiently for the boy to talk.

The other guy looked him up and down, eyebrows raised, before he sniffed, clearly unimpressed by whatever he found.

Mike stiffened, eyes narrowing at the boy in annoyance.

Who was this guy?

'Who are you?' the stranger asked, tone rude.

'I'm Mike. I live here. Who are you?' Mike said, holding an arm over the door to block the entry as the guy tried to peer into the apartment.

He made an impatient noise in the back of his throat, waving at Mike dismissively.

'Look is El here? We're running late.'

Mike blinked at him, even more confused.

Okay, who the hell was this guy? And what did he want with El?

Mike heard a door creak open and turned to see El walk out, her hair pulled back into a ponytail that strained against her curls, threatening to fall out at any second, now dressed in a pair of black jeans, a striped red and white long-sleeve shirt and an over-sized denim jacket.

'Hey Lucas,' she said, stopping beside Mike in the doorway, adjusting the bag on her back and zipping it closed before she looked up at them.

El frowned when she saw the way Mike was glaring at Lucas, his body stiff and angry. Her eyebrows drew together in confusion before it clicked and her frown deepened, as she turned her gaze onto Lucas, glaring at him and raising an eyebrow as if to say 'what did you do?'

Lucas shrugged at her, leaning uncaringly against the wall, expression bored.

Mike glanced between the two of them, reading their silent conversation and shifted awkwardly, feeling beyond uncomfortable. He turned to El, mouth already open to say goodbye when he stilled, the words freezing in his throat as he recognised the denim jacket she was wearing.

'Are you wearing my jacket?' he asked, tone surprised.

El's head snapped down to look at the jacket, a slight choking noise escaping her as her cheeks flushed bright red.

Oh god, it was his jacket. How hadn't she noticed that? she thought, remembering rushing through her room only moments before and grabbing the first jacket she'd seen on the way out, and barely resisted the urge to bury her face in her hands, wanting to sink through the floor.

Now he was going to think she was some crazy stalker stealing his clothes. Could her life get any more embarrassing?

'I'm so sorry, it must have gotten mixed up with my stuff in the wash,' she said, chewing her lip, before she dropped her bag and began to tug it off, 'here...I'll just...'

Mike saw the panic in her eyes and shook his head quickly, putting a hand on her arm to stop her movements.

El stilled at his touch, her breath catching, and lifted wide brown eyes to his, heart pounding.

Mike smiled at her, pulling the sleeve of the jacket back onto her shoulder, his fingers brushing her skin and making her tremble

'Don't worry, I'll just get it back off you later. It looks better on you anyways.'

Warmth filled El's chest as she looked at him, her lips curving up into a bright smile at his words.

Lucas stiffened, straightening as he watched them, completely unnoticed by the two of them as they smiled at each other like love-struck teenagers, head tilted and eyes narrowed, considering. His mind raced as he tried to figure out what was weird about the situation. What didn't seem right.

El let him touch her, he realised after a minute, stunned. She had always been nervous about being touched ever since he had met her, having learnt from the Bad Men in the labs that any touch usually

lead to pain, and had always flinched when you touched her without warning.

But with him...with this Mike...she didn't even blink at his touch, and, if anything, seemed to relax under his hands, looking happier than he had ever seen her before. It looked perfectly natural and easy between them.

'You're smiling. You never smile,' Lucas said, his tone matter-of-fact, though he couldn't quite hide the bewilderment beneath it.

El startled at Lucas's words, having forgotten he was there. Her eyebrows drew together, perplexed, as she thought about but he had just said.

He was right, she thought, forehead furrowing. She never used to smile. When had that changed? Why had that changed?

As she glanced at Mike, she felt her insides soften, a smile already twitching at her lips and blinked as she understood.

Oh...that's why.

Mike turned to look at Lucas, frowning in confusion.

'What are you talking about? El smiles all the time.'

When Lucas just raised his eyebrows at him, Mike felt his mouth fall into an o, realisation dawning.

She only smiled around them, he thought, staggered by the realisation, eyes widening. She was always so comfortable around him, so open and care-free, it was shocking to realise that she wasn't like that around anyone else. He felt humbled somehow, not sure that he deserved it. He didn't know what he had done to earn her trust but he knew would do anything to keep it. The very thought of her closing herself from him made his chest tighten to the edge of pain.

Lucas sighed, looking at his watch in annoyance.

'Come on, El, we have to go.' he said, impatiently.

El nodded, adjusting her bag on her back before walking out the door.

'Bye Mike', she said, turning back and smiling at him.

'Yeah, bye Mike', Lucas said, smirking at him as he wrapped an arm around El's shoulder, deliberately trying to annoy him.
Mike's face darkened, jealousy rising in him so fast it made him nauseous, his face mottling with colour.

Argh, I hate this guy, he thought, as the door closed behind them.

El shrugged Lucas off her, sending him a half-bewildered, half-pissed look, before shoving him hard.

'Why the hell did you do that?' she asked, stomping down the stairs in front of him, her arms crossed over her chest.

Lucas laughed, trailing behind more slowly.

'What? It was funny. That guy hates me,' He said, gleefully, a grin spreading across his face.

'You don't have to look so happy about it. He's my roommate, Lucas. I live with him and I happen to like living there so next time leave him alone', El snapped, tone warning.

Lucas snorted derisively.

'Please, he's more than a roommate.'

El whirled around as they left the front door of the building and looked at him, raising an eyebrow. She kept her face carefully blank even as butterflies fluttered to life in her stomach, not wanting Lucas to know how much this conversation was actually affecting her.

'What are you talking about, Lucas?' she asked, completely exasperated.

'Come on, El, he totally likes you.'

El scoffed, rolling her eyes, and began to walk towards where Lucas's

car was parked down the road.

'Yeah, right.'

'No, I'm serious. Can't you see how he watches you like a love-sick puppy? "Oh El, El...I love you so much"' he said, batting his eyelashes girlishly.

'He does not, and stop being an arse,' she snapped at him, stepping into the car and slamming the passenger door shut.

Lucas climbed in the driver's seat, shrugging, expression deliberately blank though his eyes were alit with unshed laughter.

'Whatever you say', he said, miming zipping his lips before he put the keys into the car into gear and drove out into early morning traffic.

'So, where are we going today?' she asked, stiffly, glaring out the window.

'We're going to break into Max's journalism class and hack into her computer so we can get any information she has on Brenner.'

El's head swung around and she stared at him, all anger fading away as she gaped at him in disbelief.

'Seriously?'

'Yup', he said, drawing the word out and popping the p, 'We both know Max's computers are her world, she never writes anything important down on paper and if she has anything on Brenner we haven't found it'll be on her computer.'

'How do you know she didn't take it with her...wherever the hell she is.'

Lucas shrugged.

'I don't. But this is the best we've got. I managed to track down the computer assignment list so we know which one is hers.'

'And I'm here why? Why don't you just do it yourself?' she said,

irritably.

Lucas turned his head and grinned at her.

'Because you've always been better at sneaking in than me. It's probably cause your small, you look all innocent,' he mused, taking a turn a little too sharply and causing El to skid across her seat.

'So what your actually saying is that I'm going to be breaking into the journalism class to hack into Max's computer while you twiddle your thumbs and have the risk-free job of standing watch?' El said, glaring at him.

Lucas nodded slowly, pursing his lips in mock-contemplation.

'Yeah, sounds about right.'

El huffed and slumped back against her seat, crossing her arms over her chest.

'I swear I'm doing more breaking and entering trying to find Max than I ever did on actual missions', she muttered under her breath.

They arrived at the local college five minutes later and quickly climbed from the car, slipping into the crowds of students walking across campus as they made their way towards the building at the edge of the college that held the journalism department.

They walked down the narrow hallways, looking casual and relaxed as Lucas leant back against the door of the classroom that held the computers, El standing in front of him and talking enthusiastically. To anyone else it would've looked like they were having a normal conversation, probably about a class they shared or their plans for the weekend. However, anyone with a trained eye would've noticed how El angled her body in just the right way to block Lucas's hands from sight as he quickly picked the lock on the door with a pin.

It only took two minutes and the door swung open, revealing a dimly lit classroom with rows of bulky computers lining the far wall.

El and Lucas exchanged a quick look before Lucas lifted his hand in a familiar gesture that had been their way of silently communication

while on missions in the past. Ten fingers held up. She had ten minutes to get into the computer and get out.

Piece of cake, El thought as she ducked into the classroom, grabbing the sheet of paper Lucas held out without a word on the way in. The deafening noise from outside the room was abruptly cut off as Lucas yanked the door closed behind him and stood in front of it, keeping watch.

El glanced down at the list in her hand, her eyes scanning downwards until they rested on Max's name, almost at the very bottom, and found the corresponding number next to it. She quickly walked over to the computer at the very end of the row with a large eight written in permanent marker on it, and perched on edge of the seat, her finger clicking on the mouse to bring the computer to life.

Her fingers flew across the keys, using her basic hacking skills learnt, ironically enough, from Max herself. She typed in Max's username and paused for a second as she saw the password bar, biting her lip thoughtfully.

Her eyes softened as she slowly typed in the only password she'd ever known Max to use, the only thing that had ever mattered to her. Jackson, her little brother.

Thank god you're so predictable, Max, she said, shaking her head as she began to open all the documents spread across the screen, most of them from her journalism classes, fake articles and research from local crimes and news stories.
She paused as she came to a file that simply read D.O.E, her eyes widening as she realised what it meant.

D.O.E. Department of Energy.

She quickly pressed print, jumping when the printer roared to life and shifted anxiously from foot to foot as the papers were spat from the computer, which seemed to take an eternity. As the final one finally landed on the pile, she scooped them up and carefully placed them in her mostly empty backpack, zipping it closed.

El walked over to the door and tapped on it twice, signalling to Lucas

that she was done. That she had what they needed. He casually stepped away from the door, stretching his arms and fake-yawning to hide El ducking from out of the room, closing the door behind her with a quiet click. No-one even glanced at them twice as they walked down the hall and out of the building.

They quickly climbed into the car and drove off towards El's building, the mission completed in under fifteen minutes without a hitch.

El leant her head on her hand as she stared out the window on the drive home, chewing the inside of her cheek.

Why had that felt so easy? she wondered silently. She hadn't been on a mission in more than twelve months and she just completed one with a calm that she hadn't expected to ever feel again in that sort of situation.

And more so, she'd realised that she'd missed it. She missed the satisfaction that came with completing a mission, of getting in and out of somewhere without getting caught and accomplishing something. The thrill that rushed through her veins.

But I don’t want to miss it, she thought, irritated with herself and slumping down further in her seat. I just want a normal life. Is that too much to ask?

She was so lost in her thoughts she didn't notice Lucas glancing at her every few minutes, head tilted, and lips pursed.

'So....this Mike guy...' he began, tone casual.

El groaned, annoyed, throwing her head back against the seat as she turned to glower at him.

'God, Lucas, can you please just drop it?'

Lucas shook his head, expression stubborn.

'Nope. Come on, I know you like him, El.'

El turned her head away to look out the window, avoiding his faze as she nibbled on her bottom lip anxiously, guilt and confusion filling

her.

He was right. She did like Mike. She liked him a lot. But...she didn't understand. How could she like him? Wasn't she only supposed to have feelings for Him? For her soulmate? Did this make her a bad person?

Lucas glanced over at her, and sighed when he saw she was silently beating herself up, her eyes downcast and full of confusion and pain.

'Look...I know I can be a jerk most the time but believe I'm being serious when I say this, okay? If he makes you happy you should go for it.'

El turned wide, confused eyes to his, her expression torn.

'But, what about...?' she asked, trailing off as she tugged pointedly at her sleeve.

'The truth is you may never meet Him. Most soulmates never find each other. Joyce and Hopper, Nancy and the guys, me and...' he swallowed before he could say his name, guilt rising and squeezing his throat. He shook his head quickly, pushing the feeling away before he continued speaking, 'we were just lucky. You can't wait your whole life for someone who might not show up, El. If you really like him, and I can tell you do, just tell him.'

El stared at him for so long Lucas could almost feel her eyes digging into the side of his head before she gave a small tentative smile.

'I'll...I'll think about it. Thanks, Lucas'.

He nodded sharply, uncomfortable with the gratitude and affection of her face, and was undeniably grateful when he pulled over in front of her building only seconds later.

'Good. Now get out', he said, leaning over El to push her door open.

El rolled her eyes, an affectionate smile curving her lips.

'There's the Lucas I know.'

She leant over and pressed a quick kiss to his cheek, before grabbing her bag and climbing out of the car.

Lucas waved her off, his cheeks darkening as he scowled up at her good-naturedly.

'See you later?', she asked, crouching down to peer at Lucas.

'Let me know if you find anything in those papers', he told her, nodding as he pulled his sunglasses down and turned his attention back to the traffic.

El nodded, closing the door and waving as she watched him pull away from the curb, feeling hopeful in a way she hadn't in a long time.

She walked up the five levels to the apartment, panting slightly as she finally reached the top and opened the door to the apartment. She paused as she walked into the living room, surprised to see Mike sitting at the kitchen table, textbooks spread out around him, head down and mouth moving silently as he read.

She pressed her lips together, feet shifting nervously, as she glanced around, not really knowing what to do.

It felt weird to see him so soon after what she'd just admitted to Lucas, and to herself. She felt like everything was written all over her face, a neon sign that blinked 'I like you, I like you', and didn't know how to act. But she knew she couldn't just avoid him, not without him truly realising something was going on.

Mike lifted his head and froze when he saw her, surprise slackening his features. He quickly closed his mouth and rose to his feet, smiling in greeting.

'Hey', he said, dark eyes warm as he looked at her, glancing behind her as if he expected someone else to follow her in.

'Hey,' she said, voice croaking slightly as she tried to return the smile he gave her, though she knew it was probably coming out like a strange sort of grimace, 'you're home early.'

Mike shrugged.

'Yeah, classes were cut short today.'

'Oh', El said quietly, feeling awkward in a way she hadn't in weeks.

She waited for him to speak, her nerves stretching to their limit as the silence continued before she gave up and gave a nervous wave, turning to quickly walk to her room.

Mike stepped forward, eyes popping wide, panic running through at the thought of not asking the question that had been driving him crazy since she'd left, and blurted it out, unable to bite back the words.

'Is that Lucas your boyfriend?'

El stopped, turning back to stare at him with wide eyes, her mouth falling open slightly. She suddenly burst out laughing, wrapping her arms around herself as tears filled her eyes.

Mike looked at her, bewildered

What was so funny?

El's laughter petered off into quiet giggles, and she wiped at her eyes before shaking her head at him, pressing her lips together to keep from laughing again.

'God, no, he's just a friend. I've known him forever and he's more like a brother than anything. He was just being an arse, as per usual. By the way, I'm really sorry about earlier. He won't do it again.'

Mike sighed with relief, his shoulders relaxing as the anxious pitching and clenching of stomach loosened.

He had felt a pang of something he didn't even recognise inside him since she'd walked out of the apartment with Lucas, a feeling that had left him feeling shaky and afraid. He hadn't been able to concentrate on a single word being said throughout his short lecture, at the thought of El having a boyfriend, a concept that just seemed...wrong somehow.

It didn't make sense though. Why would he feel like this? Why should it matter to him whether El had a boyfriend or not? He had a soulmate waiting for him somewhere, a girl he had loved since he was a child. Why was he acting like this?

Mike blinked, coming back into focus and saw her frowning at him worriedly, her eyebrows drawn together, confused by his far-off expression. He quickly smiled at her, expression reassuring.

El smiled back at him cheerfully, before she turned and walked into her room, stopping to wave at him at the door before she closed it behind her.

Mike felt his heart skip a beat at her smile and squeezed his eyes shut, swallowing back a heavy sigh before he opened them to stare up at the ceiling.

God, he was so screwed.

Notes for the Chapter:

> What did everyone think? As always let me know xx-Katie

9. Chapter 9

Notes for the Chapter:

> Hey everyone!!! Here's the next chapter! This is one of my favourite chapters to be honest, so much awkwardness and fluffiness, ahhhh! Anyways, I hope you enjoy it!! x- Katie
> P.S. Part of this chapter was inspired by a post on Tumblr so if you are reading, thank you for your inspiration!!!

Dustin swaggered out of his room, grinning widely as he stopped in the middle of the living room in front of El and Mike, who were sitting on opposite couches reading.

'So, how do I look?' he asked, giving a goofy cat-walk pose as he held his dinner jacket out, revealing his black slacks and blue button up underneath.

El let out a quick laugh, slapping a hand to her mouth to hide her grin. Mike looked up, grinned, wolf-whistling at him playfully.

'Fan-cy! Someone's gone all out.'

'Well, I can't disappoint my lady', Dustin said, grinning before turning and walking towards the front door, 'Don't wait up.'

'Someone's feeling lucky', Mike called after him and Dustin stopped, turning back to smirk at them.

'Oh, I know I'm getting lucky', he said, winking at El who shook her head, sticking her tongue out in disgust.

'Augh, too much information, Dustin!'

Dustin laughed, waving goodbye as he almost skipped out of the apartment, slamming the door shut behind him.

El and Mike stared at each other in the sudden silence, both still feeling awkward after their almost kiss two weeks ago, and the

mortifying boyfriend conversation, something they'd both been avoiding talking about, Mike too embarrassed and El not entirely sure it had happened at all.

As the silence stretched even longer, El cleared her throat quietly, desperately searching for something, anything, to say to break it.

'So....Dustin and this girl are getting pretty serious', she said thoughtfully.

It was their fifth date since El had moved in almost two months ago, and she knew they had begun dating long before that. She had yet to meet her, whoever she was.

Mike's head snapped up to look at her, surprised she had spoken but eternally grateful as he grabbed at the opening she'd offered.

'Yeah. From what Dustin has said he's starting to think she's his soulmate.'

At the word soulmate El stiffened, nodding at Mike before glancing down at her book, refusing to look up.

'Maybe,' she said, voice quiet.

She hated talking about soulmates. The very word caused her insides to churn guiltily, unable to avoid thinking of her own soulmate, out there somewhere and probably hating her for what she had done to him.

Mike frowned, confused, watching as the blood drained from El's face, leaving her looking white and shaky.

'You don't like soulmates?'

'No...' she denied quickly, her head jerking up to look at him. Blood rushed to her cheeks, tinting them pink as she realised how obvious a lie that was.

Mike raised an eyebrow at her, slightly amused by her attempt, and she sighed, shrugging dejectedly.

'Well...not entirely. I've just always...I mean...it doesn't make sense. What if fate got it wrong? What if and your soulmate aren't right for each other?' she asked, turning wide to his, desperately wanting an answer to the question that had been plaguing her for years.

She knew she wasn't right for Him, for her soulmate. She knew he deserved better. So why had fate thrown them together, deemed they were meant for each other? She just didn't understand it.

Mike frowned, expression thoughtful.

He'd never thought of it that way, never questioned. He had always been sure, from the moment he spoke to Her, that she was the one for him.

'I don't know...' he said, after a long moment, 'I guess you just have to trust that fate didn't get it wrong.'

A tiny line formed between her eyes as she frowned at him, clearly unconvinced and Mike sighed before continuing to speak.

'My...my parents weren't soulmates. I'm not even sure why they got married, all they did was fight and live in the same house. My dad eventually met his soulmate at his work when I was fifteen and he left us for her. I guess I just like the idea of something permanent, you know? Something that won't leave.'

Mike blinked, and quickly averted his eyes away, blood filling his cheeks so rapidly he felt like they were on fire, completely mortified.

He couldn't believe he'd admitted something so personal to her! He hadn't ever said that aloud, not even to Dustin. There was just something about her, something that made him feel like he could say anything, be open in a way he hadn't ever been with anyone else.

El's face softened as she watched him shifting awkwardly, clearly embarrassed and walked over to sit beside him, putting a hand on his shoulder and squeezing gently.

'I'm sorry, Mike. Your Dad sounds like a real prick.'

Mike head swiveled around to stare at her before he burst out

laughing at her words, shaking his head.

'Yeah, he really is. I'm going to head to bed. I'm pretty tired,' Mike said abruptly, jumping to his feet and looking down at her, rubbing his neck awkwardly, unable to sit still after everything he'd just revealed.

El looked at his for a long moment, clearly seeing through his excuse, before her lip twitched up into the half-smile he was slowly coming to love, eyes soft and full of understanding.

'Night, Mike.'

Mike nodded, waving at her, before walking to his room and quietly shutting the door behind him.

El sighed as she watched him leave, chewing her lip worriedly.

She could tell Mike was upset, even if he tried to hide it. Her chest tightened at she thought of the pain and hurt she'd seen in his eyes, the pain he had tried to hide. She only wished she could do something to take it away.

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Mike lay in bed, glaring up at the ceiling, eyes heavy and sore, but unable to sleep. He had been lying there for almost three hours, since he'd left El, but had been unable to drift off.

He sat up with a sigh, running a hand down his face. He frowned as he heard the television come on, eyes squinting across the room to look at numbers that blinked on his alarm clock, as if mocking him.

1.30. Was Dustin back already?

He pushed his sheets off and climbed out of bed, stumbling in the dark before finding his door and opening it, blinking in the blurry bright light that shone from across the room.

Mike's eyes focused and he blinked when he saw El lying on her back on the couch, a bowl of popcorn sitting in her lap, her tired eyes glued to the television screen.

What was El doing up? He was sure he heard her go to bed hours ago.

El lay back against the arm of the couch, exhaustion beating at her, as she tried to concentrate on what was happening on the screen. Something shifted at the corner of her eyes and she stiffened, head swinging around so fast her neck ached, throat clenching in panic.

Her eyes fell on Mike and she relaxed, smiling slightly in relief, as she turned to pause the movie.

Her smile faded as she looked at him more closely, seeing the dark circles under his eyes.

'You alright?' she asked softly, pushing her hair back behind her ear, eyebrows drawn together in concern.

Mike shrugged, lip twitching into a small smile.

'Can't sleep.'

El nodded, rubbing at her tired eyes, fatigue beating at her.

'Me either.'

Silence fell between them as they looked at each other, both shifting awkwardly, not knowing what to say after their moment earlier.

Mike ran a hand through his hair and slowly began to back away.

'You're busy...I'll just...'

'No,' she yelled, sitting up straighter to peer at him over the back of the couch, heart sinking at the thought of him leaving.

She ignored the heat that filled her cheeks as he turned back to her, mouth hanging open in surprise at her abrupt shout, and gestured lamely at the television.

'You could stay and watch with me. I mean...if you want to. We could keep each other company till we're both tired.'

Mike nodded after a moment, smiling widely.

'Sure. I'd like that.'

He walked over the couch quickly, stopping in front of it when he saw El had her legs stretched out long across it. She went to pull them back but stilled when Mike shook his head at her, stopping her.

El's breath hitched in her throat, heart racing in her chest as he simply lifted her legs and sat beneath them, before quietly settling them into his lap.

El bit her lip, staring at him as she tried to control her suddenly fast breath, superconscious of his hand resting on her ankle, absentmindedly tracing patterns on her skin.

Mike turned to look at El when she didn't turn the movie on and frowned in concern when he found her staring at him, eyes wide.

'What's wrong?'

'Nothing', she said, shaking her head jerkily.

She quickly pressed play on the remote, unpausing the movie. She stared determinedly at the screen, trying not to look at him as he relaxed, hand now resting heavily on her calf.

'What are you watching?' he asked curiously, head tilted as he turned to look at her, worriedly. She was acting weird.

El shrugged, lips pursed slightly.

'I don't know. It's one of Dustin's videos, I just grabbed it randomly', she said, as she reached over and picked up the cover off the coffee table, squinting at the title in the light from the television screen, 'it's the...'

'The Labyrinth,' Mike said suddenly, leaning forward eagerly, a grin on his face as a man with wild blond hair and a wide grin suddenly came on the screen.

El blinked at him, before a smile curved her lips, amused by his

reaction.

'You know it?'

'Yeah, I used to love it as a kid. I watched it all the time, until Mom made me stop because I was having nightmares. I was terrified of the Goblin's King's cod piece', he said, without thinking and froze, absolutely mortified, his mouth and opening closing like a fish.

God, why did he have to say that? Idiot!

El frowned at him, confused.

'What's a cod piece?'

Heat rushed to Mike's cheek and he shifted on the couch, hands jerking nervously in his lap.

'Uh...it's...you know...', he began, struggling to get the words out before giving up with a quiet moan. He squeezed his eyes shut as he gestured awkwardly at his lap before pointing at the television where David Bowie was strutting across the screen, the bulge of his codpiece in plain view.

El looked at the television, mouth falling open as understanding filled her, before glancing back at Mike, who was blushing so much he looked like a tomato.

Her lips twitched in amusement, trying hard to hold back a laugh, pressing her lips together. Tears filled her eyes as a single laugh escaped and before she knew it she had collapsed back against the arm of the couch, giggling uncontrollably.

'Oh my god,' she gasped, tears running down her cheeks, clutching her stomach as it began to ache.

'Stop. I'm serious. That was shit was scary, it looked like it was coming straight at me!' Mike said, pouting at her, though he couldn't help the smile that curved his lips as he saw her laughing, a small chuckle of his own escaping.

El burst into fresh laughter, dashing at the tears coating her cheeks,

cheeks hurting from smiling so hard.

'Oh, shut up,' Mike said, mock-glaring at her, the effect totally ruined by the wide grin on his face.

El's laughter petered off into tiny giggles as she handed him the bowl of popcorn as an apology. Mike took it happily, throwing some into the air and catching it in his mouth.

They munched happily as they watched, Mike explaining the scenes she didn't understand. El loved the movie, and Mike found himself grinning as she stared, fascinated by the puppets and Sarah's dress, her eyes going huge as she watched the ball scene. They threw popcorn each other, both trying to catch it their mouths and failing miserably as they laughed, leaving a mess of popcorn around them. They slowly began to relax as the movie neared the end, yawning every now and then as they curled closer to each other without even noticing.

El's eyes began to droop as the final scenes started to play. She blinked, trying to stay awake so she could see the end, but her eyes fluttered shut without her permission, completely exhausted after a long day of reading through the papers they'd collected from Max's computer.

She was quietly surprised as she drifted off, head sliding down the back of the couch, to find that she felt completely safe falling asleep with Mike. She never fell asleep around anyone, not trusting them enough to be that vulnerable, not even her family. But she trusted Mike, despite having only known him for a few months. She knew he wouldn't let anything happen to her.

As sleep pulled her away, the last thing she was aware of was the scent of lemon that clung to Mike's skin from his soap filling her nose as her head landed softly on his shoulder.

As the end scene began to roll through, and Sarah got her baby brother back, Mike felt a slight weight settle against his shoulder. He stilled, holding his breath as he glanced down and saw El asleep on his shoulder, her hair brushing his cheek.

Oh my god, oh my god, he thought, dazedly, staring down at her face, soft and relaxed with sleep. He was almost afraid to breathe, let alone move, not wanting to wake her when she had finally fallen asleep.

He stared at her as she shifted in her sleep, frowning slightly, lips pursed. She wiggled closer, wrapping an arm around his waist, one of her hands slipping under his shirt. He squirmed slightly, stomach jerking back from her cold touch, eyes wide.

Holy shit, this was really happening.

El let out a happy sigh, smiling slightly, and Mike felt every muscle in his body relax, smiling down at her adoringly as she settled again. He carefully wrapped an arm around her shoulders, pulling a blanket off the back of the couch to cover them both.

She was so beautiful, he thought, eyes tracing her features before he closed them, leaning his head against hers.

I'll just wake her in a few minutes, he thought, before drifting off to sleep, unable to remember a time when he had felt this content.

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Mike jolted awake as he felt a hand shaking him, his bleary eyes wide. He glanced around the dark living room, static buzzing loudly on the television screen, frowning. He swung his head back up, blinking as he saw Dustin looking down at him from beside the couch, a smirk twisting his lips.

He crossed his arms over his chest smugly, his shirt wrinkled and curly hair messier than usual, as if someone had been running their hands through it.

'Have a nice sleep?', he said, voice hushed, glancing pointedly at something beside Mike, eyebrows raised.

Mike looked down, frowning slightly, confused. His frown fell away as he saw El curled up beside him, everything inside him melting. She looked adorable, completely relaxed in sleep, her eyelashes brushing cheeks which were squished up against him. Her head was

now resting on his chest while she was practically in sitting in his lap, her breath warming his neck.

Mike looked back up at Dustin and his amused, smug grin and glared at him, cheeks on fire.

'Not a word', he warned quietly, pointing a finger at him.

Dustin grinned, letting out a quiet chuckle as he slowly backed away towards his room.

'Whatever you say, Wheeler', he said, winking at him as he closed his door behind him.

Mike closed his eyes, groaning.

Augh, Dustin was going to give him so much shit for this.

But it was totally worth it, Mike thought as he looked at El, a soft smile curving his lips as he gently began to shake her awake.

'El...'

El frowned, lips pursing as she came awake, mumbling irritably before she opened her eyes. She looked around dazedly, sight blurry, before she looked up and saw Mike looking down at her.

She blinked, confusion filling her.

What was Mike doing in her room?

She felt something shift underneath her and stilled as memories from earlier that night flashed through her mind.

She glanced down, butterflies coming to life in her stomach as she saw she was practically lying in his lap. Blood filled her cheeks as she jolted, her head flying upwards and almost knocking into Mike's chin, only missing as he quickly pulled his head back.

El stared down at his shirt, too embarrassed to meet his eyes, and blushed deeper when she saw she had left a wet spot on his shirt from drool.

'Oh my god, I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to fall asleep on you,' she said, scrambling to her feet.

Mike took in her embarrassed expression, cheeks flushed, and bit back a laugh as he climbed to his feet. He took her hand gently in his, squeezing as he turned her so she had to look at him.

El reluctantly lifted her head to look at him and was stunned by the crooked smile on his face instead of the annoyed frown she'd expected.

'Don't worry, El. I really don't mind'.

El stared at him for a second, before her lips curved up into a smile, warmth filling her chest, as she ducked her head to try and hide it.

They quickly turned off the television and stumbled through the darkness to their rooms, still clutching each other's hands as they bumped into furniture, giggling quietly.

They finally reached El's room and she glanced back at him, eyes soft in the darkness.

'Goodnight, Mike', she said, giving a sleepy half-smile before going inside.

'Night, El', Mike called back, smiling goofily for a second before he shook his head, walking to his room and throwing himself on the bed with a happy sigh.

He closed his eyes, feeling sleep pulling him back under quickly, unable to ignore the pang in his chest and the feeling that something was missing.

Or, if he was being completely honest with himself, someone.

Notes for the Chapter:

> What did everyone think? As always let me know. You have no idea how much I look forward to your reviews :D- Katie xoxo

10. Chapter 10

Notes for the Chapter:

> Hey everyone! So this is the longest chapter I have ever written. It literally took three days for me to edit it!!! But it was such a fun chapter I really didn't mind :) I really hope you guys love this one just as much as I do!!!- Katie xx

El lay on her stomach on her bed, resting her chin on her folded arms as she read the book Dustin had leant her, claiming she just had to read it. She loved the idea of Hobbits and adventures as she read but found that no matter what she did the writing put her to sleep.

She was just beginning to drift off when a phone began to ring somewhere in her room.

El jolted awake, lifting her head drowsily to glance around the room, rubbing her tired eyes with one hand, trying to focus. She lazily rolled over and reached inside the drawer of her bedside table and pulled out the chunky phone that sat there, a loan from Lucas so they could keep in touch privately.

She flipped it open with a yawn, lying back against the headboard of her bed.

'Lucas? I thought we were meeting up tomorrow', she said, glancing down at her blue pyjamas with white fluffy clouds on them and desperately hoped she wouldn't have to get changed. She was really not in the mood for a mission, bone-tired from reading and re-reading the information they'd gotten from Max's computer, her mind feeling fuzzy like cotton wool and eyes aching.

'Can you meet me somewhere?', he asked without a greeting, 'In half an hour?'

El almost groaned but something in his voice stopped her. She sat up slowly, her forehead furrowing into a frown as she listened to him. There was something not right about the way he was speaking, a

tightness and trembling that wasn't usually there, as if he was fighting some emotion. Lucas had always been an expert at keeping his emotions shielded from everyone, even those he was closest to. For this change to be showing, even in this tiny way that no-one else would've noticed, something must be up.

She couldn't not go. She knew he needed her. And he'd always been there when she needed him.

'Of course. Are you o...' she began but he quickly interrupted, muttering the name of a local club before the phone clicked in her ear, the call abruptly ending.

She lowered the beeping phone and stared at it for a second before she sighed and pressed the end button. She quickly rose to her feet, walking over to open one of the boxes still piled against the wall and, after a few minutes of rummaging through the contents, pulled out a dress she hadn't worn since her days in the compound. The last time she'd worn it her and the others had snuck out to a local bar, using the flawless fake IDs Max had made them all, and had drunk so much they'd all been sick for days afterwards.

El's lip twitched at the memory as she reluctantly slipped out of her warm pyjamas and hurriedly pulled the silky material up over her body. She peered at herself in the mirror, turning this way and that, before she nodded, satisfied. She then walked over to the mirror and slicked on some pink lip-gloss, black mascara and blush, not bothering with anything else. She didn't plan to be there too long.

Thank god I shaved, she thought as she slipped on a pair of nude heels and walked out into the living room, grabbing a small bag off the bag of her door as she went.

Dustin glanced up as she passed, giving a double-take before a wolfish grin spread across his face and he whistled at her.

'Well, hello. Where are we off to tonight? Hot date?'

El rolled her eyes at him good-naturedly, waving him off with a loud snort.

'Ha ha. No, I'm just going to meet Lucas for a few drinks, he seems a little down and wants to talk.'

Her eyes swung to Mike, who was blinking at her, his mouth hanging open as he looked her up and down, stunned.

Wow. She looked gorgeous, was the only thought inside his mind, everything else fading into the background.

He'd never seen her in a dress before and the soft pink colour of the one she was wearing made her look like she was glowing. It was high at the front with a low back that stopped just above the curve of her bottom with long sleeves that fell down to her wrists. Even her eyes seemed bigger and brighter somehow.

El waited for him to speak, twisting her hands anxiously in front of her as he remained speechless, dark eyes wide.

'What's wrong? Is the dress not okay?' she asked worriedly, biting her lip as she glanced down at herself.

Mike frantically shook his head, his stupor falling away at her words and quickly rose to his feet, walking over to reassure her.

'No...no, it's nothing like that. You look pretty, El... like really pretty.'

Heat rushed to both their cheeks as their eyes collided. El could feel herself turning red, but kept her eyes on his, searching his face incredulously, not quite believing him.

'Really?'

He nodded, swallowing hard, his expression earnest and serious.

'Really.'

El just stared at him, eyes soft, before a slow smile curved her lips. Mike felt a grin stretching his cheeks as he returned the bright beaming smile she now gave him, feeling somehow proud.

El rose up on her toes and pressed a soft kiss to his warm cheek, feeling the heat lingering on her lips as she pulled away.

'Thank you,' she said, her voice low so Dustin couldn't hear before she reluctantly pulled away, turning and walking to the door.

Mike grabbed her hand gently as she turned to leave, clearing his throat awkwardly as she jerked slightly and turned back, raising curious and expectant eyes to his.

'Do you...do you need a lift? I can take you if you want.'

El smiled at him softly, shaking her head.

'No, I'm good, I have a taxi waiting downstairs. But I'll see you later?', she asked, nose crinkling when he nodded eagerly. They both let go reluctantly, fingers brushing each other's as they parted.

'Bye, Mike. See ya, Dustin', she said, giving a quick wave as she walked out the door, flicking a quick smile over her shoulder that made Mike's heart jump before she disappeared.

'See ya, El', Dustin said, barely glancing up from the television, determinedly pretending he hadn't just heard every word they'd just said.

Mike stared after her, hand rising to touch his cheek where he could still feel the brush of her lips against his skin, expression awed.

Bloody hell, you are an idiot, Wheeler, he grumbled inwardly, lowering his hand and slumping against the wall, face falling. You can't keep doing this to her. Make a decision. Tell the girl how you feel or move on.

Dustin walked up behind him and looked at him thoughtfully for a long moment, lips slightly pursed and eyes speculative.

'You really like her, don't you?'

Mike swung towards him, mouth instinctively opening to deny it but stopped at the knowing look on Dustin's face, his mouth snapping shut in defeat.

What was the point of denying it anymore? They both knew he'd be lying.

'Yeah...I like her. I think...I more than just like her.'

'So why don't you just tell her?' Dustin asked, eyebrows drawing together in confusion.

Mike sighed, grabbing his hair and tugging hard in frustration, slumping even further down the wall.

'I....Dustin, I can't. I shouldn't like her...I mean', he paused, taking a deep breath to sort out of his thoughts as Dustin made a face at him, obviously not understanding, 'I mean...I can't like her, not with...'

Mike glanced down at his wrist and ran his fingers over the mark that sat there, hidden by his long-sleeve shirt, his entire body feeling heavy with guilt.

Dustin's eyes followed the gesture and he walked over to lean against the wall beside him, nudging his shoulder with his own.

'Most people...Mike, not everyone finds their soulmate. But you can still be in love and happy with someone else. Look at my parents. They're not soulmates but they're so happy together, so disgustingly lovey-dovey, it sometimes makes gag just thinking about it. But it's exactly what I want, soul mark or no soul mark. Not all unmatched couples are like your parents were, Mike.'

Mike swallowed hard as he looked down at the ground, not really surprised that Dustin had worked out the exact reason he was hesitating. The reason he hadn't told El how he felt or made a move. Dustin had always been able to read people.

He was scared, absolutely terrified that they would end up resenting and eventually hating each other in a few years, just like his parents had. He couldn't do that to her. The idea of being stuck in a loveless marriage, of El looking at him with hate in her eyes, made him go cold. He couldn't go through that again.

'I know', he said, voice quieter, pain lancing through as he looked up at Dustin and said the words that had been plaguing him since he'd first met El, 'But how can I just let Her go? After all this time?'

Dustin took in the confused and frightened look on Mike's face and

let out a heavy sigh.

'I don't know, Mike. Only you can make that decision. All I do know is that there is a beautiful girl living with us who looks at you like you are her entire world, like you bring the sun, and I know you like her so why not give it a chance? Tell her how you feel', he said, clapping Mike on the shoulder before turning and walking back to the couch,

Mike stood staring at the front door for a long time, his insides twisting anxiously, feeling more torn about a choice than he ever had before. He stiffened after a moment, lifting his chin decisively, suddenly resolved.

He knew what he wanted. But was he strong enough to let go and make it happen?

**

El walked into the crowded club, tucking her fake ID back into the tiny pocket of her dress as she glanced around at the throngs of people. Deafening music pumped from the loud speakers strategically placed around the large room, and multi-coloured lights flashed from every direction, drawing people to the dance floor. There were endless amounts of people, some squished together in tight circles, yelling over the music to speak to one another while others were sweating on the huge dance floor, all dressed in anything from casual jeans and shirts to slinky dresses and suits.

She skirted and squeezed past the dance floor and the people lining the bar, rising on her toes to try and peer over the crowds, silently cursing her diminutive height. It was only by pure chance that a group of people parted in front of her and she spotted Lucas sitting at the far bar, staring down into his drink.

She walked over to the empty stool beside him and boosted herself up, spinning around to look at him.

'Hey.'

Lucas just nodded, not looking up or meeting her eyes.

El pulled a face at him, resisting the urge to roll her eyes.

Great, he was in one of those moods.

'Okay...you going to tell me what you wanted to talk about?' she asked, slowly, eyebrows raised.

He was silent for a moment before he spoke, his voice so quiet it was barely audible over the music.

'Did you find anything in the papers we got from Max?'

El's frown deepened. She could have just told him that over the phone. What was with him?

She shrugged after staring at the side of his head for a few seconds, deciding to go along with...whatever this was, knowing there was no point trying to talk to him in this mood.

'Yeah I did. Max somehow managed to track down adoption papers that Brenner signed in 1991, officially taking custody of a twelve-year-old boy. 1991, Lucas', she said, raising her voice slightly when he didn't react, 'the same year we began to shut down the laboratories. He must have made a run for it then and taken him with him. The boy's name was Jackson Roberts. Max was right, Brenner has her brother.'

As Lucas just continued to stare down into his drink, El glared at him and rose off her stool to lean over and look into his face. His face was slack, sweat running down his temple as his glassy red eyes staring unseeingly into space.

'Are you even listening?'

When Lucas just rolled his eyes at her, knocking his drink as he raised his hand, sloshing the contents all over the counter, El's eyes widened.

'Wait, are you drunk?' she asked, surprised.

'What's it to you?' he snapped, lifting his glass, which was filled to the brim with a brown liquid, to his lips for another sip.

El narrowed her eyes at him, irritated, and snatched the drink out of his hand, ignoring the way he reached for it, his movements sloppy and awkward. His face darkened as she held it out of reach, turning dark angry eyes onto her.

El just raised an eyebrow at him, uncowed by his glare, and waited patiently until he deflated, swinging back around to face the bar as he buried his face in his hands.

'Will knows', he said, his voice muffled, 'he walked in on me getting changed at the Compound last night and saw my mark.'

'Oh,' El said, lips falling into a small o as she stared at the back of his bowed head, slowly placing the drink back down in front of him. Her other hand hovered hesitantly over his back, wanting to comfort him but she knew he wouldn't appreciate it in this mood.

'Yeah', Lucas said, taking a deep shuddering breath as he lifted his head and grabbed his drink, draining almost half in one sip, 'Pretty sure he hates me now.'

'Lucas, Will couldn't ever hate you... he loves you, I know he does. He's probably just hurt. I'm sure if you...'

Lucas swung red-rimmed eyes to hers and El's words trailed off, stunned by the pain darkening his eyes.

'I really don't want to talk about it right now. I just want to drink. So are you going to lecture me and leave or are you going to drink with me?'

El studied him silently, her lips pressed together sadly. He looked completely miserable, staring down into his drink, his clothes rumpled as if he'd slept in them and his dark eyes like some kicked puppies.

She didn't have the heart to lecture him, not when he was so clearly beating himself, his shoulders slumped and curled inwards.

Instead, El nodded at the bartender, tilted her head down at Lucas's drink with a smile. A glass filled with the same amber liquid was quickly set in front of her and El lifted it and clinked her glass against

Lucas's.

'Let's drink.'

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Mike's head snapped up as the phone began to ring shrilly from its spot on the wall. He exchanged a look with Dustin, both of them glancing down at their watches and blinking in surprise.

It was almost 1 in the morning. Who would be calling this late?

Mike quickly rose to his feet and picked up the phone, holding it up to his ear.

'Hello', he asked, tone questioning.

'Heeeeyyy!' a voice yelled into the phone, almost swallowed by the roar of other voices and the constant pump of music that played in the background.

Mike winced, holding the phone away from his ear as the loud voice yelled through the receiver, before he paused, a concerned frown furrowing his forehead as he recognised the voice on the other end.

'El? What's going on? Are you okay?' he asked, worriedly, glancing over at Dustin with wide eyes who just raised his eyebrows at him questioningly. Mike just shrugged, not knowing what to tell him.

'Oh hey, you...' she said, letting out a small hiccup into the phone as there was a quiet crash as if she'd fallen into a wall.

'What the...are you drunk?' Mike asked, tone incredulous, eyes widening as his mouth fell open in surprise.

'Yup...and you're Mike', she said, bursting into a fit of giggles.

'El, what's going on? Where's your friend?'

Mike could almost hear El rolling her eyes through the phone, giving a heavy, put-upon sigh.

'He left with some girl. I told him it… it wouldn't make it better but does he listen? No-oo! Lucas's upset. Will's so mad at him', she said, sadness filling her voice.

'He just left you there?' Mike asked, anger rising in him. How could he just leave her alone like this?

'It's fine...I've had te-qui-la! Lots and lots of tequila', she told him, singing into the phone, giggling again quietly.

'El, where are you? We'll come get you', Mike said, gesturing at Dustin with one hand, miming getting his car keys. Dustin nodded and walked quickly into his room.

'I'm at the Spot. Isn't that a funny name? It sounds like....like a Dalmatian.'

Mike barely held back a laugh, shaking his head as his lips twitched up in amusement.

'Well...you're not wrong...'

'Ooh, my drinks are here. Bye Mike', she said, abruptly hanging up before he could protest, the phone clicking in his ear.

Dustin came up behind Mike stared down at the phone in trepidation, worry filling him as he replaced it in the holder.

God, he hoped she was okay. If she wasn't he was going to kick that Lucas's ass.

'I'm guessing that was El', Dustin said simply, looking at him and handing him the keys.

'Yeah, and she's completely wasted. Do you mind driving down with me to get her?'

Dustin shook his head, grinning widely as he shrugged into his jacket.

'As if I'm staying home. This is going to be hilarious', he said, laughing slightly, rubbing his hands together in anticipation.

Mike rolled his eyes, letting out a short laugh as they walked out the door. Typical Dustin, he thought, amused as they walked down the stairs and out the front where Dustin's car was parked.

They climbed into the car, Mike in the driver's seat, and pulled out into traffic. Mike drove way faster than the speed limit, anxious to get to El, but somehow managed to avoid getting pulled over by the police in the fifteen minutes it took to get to the club.

They walked into the club, that was slowly beginning to empty, though there were still quite a few people on the dance floor and seated at the bar. It didn't take them long to spot El spinning on a stool at the end of the bar, a glass of water held in her hands.

Mike let out a sigh of relief and began to walk over with Dustin, squeezing past a group of guys getting their final drinks of their night.

'Hey you two', a voice called out.

Mike and Dustin turned towards the man behind the bar who was waving them over. They exchanged a look before walking over to him, both keeping their eyes on El to make sure she didn't run off and disappear.

'Is she yours?' the bartender asked, raising his eyebrows at him, leaning against the counter as he tilted his head towards El.

Mike felt his heart skip a beat at the bartender’s words and the life-altering implications behind them. Though he couldn't deny the warmth that filled his chest at the very thought. There was something that just seemed so right about her belonging to him and him to her.

Mike nodded, ignoring Dustin as he saw his head snap towards him out of the corner of his eyes, eyes bulging.

'Yeah she's mine...I mean with me. I'm here to pick her up', he said, cheeks flushing as he rambled nervously.

The bartender nodded, relief smoothing his forehead.

'Good. The guy she was with earlier left with someone like an hour

ago so I made her call you guys and kept her at the bar. I didn't want her wandering around in this condition.'

Mike nodded at him.

'Thanks, man. I appreciate it', he said, before turning and beginning to walk towards El.

'Yours huh?' Dustin said, smirking smugly at him.

'Shut up, Dustin' he muttered, and shot him a dark look as Dustin snickered.

El lifted her head at that moment and grinned as she saw them, hopping off the stool and running towards them. She threw herself into Mike's arms, making him stumble back, as his arms instinctively wrapped around her.

She lifted her head from his chest and gave him a big, excited grin that made his heart race.

'Hey. What are you doing here?' she asked happily, cheeks flushed bright red and eyes glassy and unfocused.

'We came down to get you...don't you remember calling?' he asked, frowning worriedly.

How much had she had to drink?

She frowned, expression thoughtful, as she pursed her lips into a slight pout that he couldn't help but find adorable.

'No...' she said, drawing out the word before her face cleared and she smiled happily up at him.

'Never mind. You're here now. Oh....we should dance,' she said suddenly, eyes lighting up at the thought.

Panic rushed into him and he quickly looked at Dustin, eyes begging for help. Dustin just shrugged at him, expression amused.

'Yeah, Mike. Dance with the girl', he said, winking and grinning

cheekily at him.

Mike glared at him, narrowing his eyes.

Traitor.

El blinked, leaning across Mike to peer at Dustin with a wide smile.

'Oh, hey Dustin!'

Dustin chuckled.

'Hey El', he said, ruffling her hair before he walked to the bar and sat down to order a drink.

Mike groaned, looking back down at El who was peering up at him, giving him puppy-dog eyes that made his insides melt.

'Please', she begged, pouting at him.

Mike felt all his protests and excuses disappear at the pleading look on her face and sighed, knowing he couldn't say no to her. And, honestly, he didn't really want to.

El's face lit up, before something shifted behind her eyes and she gave him a mischievous smile. Mike felt everything inside him stand up to attention at the look in her eyes, breath coming out in a rush as El curled her fingers into his belt and began to back into the throng of dancers, her warm brown eyes never leaving his.

As they reached the middle of the dance floor El took his hands from where they hung limply by his side, his entire body vibrating with anticipation, and placed them on her hips, glancing up at him, expression impish. Mike swallowed hard as she wrapped her arms around his neck and began to sway, her breasts brushing against his chest.

Mike barely heard the music that played around them, his eyes glued to hers, as she twisted from side to side, her eyes closed, confident and sure. Every muscle in his body tensed as he became hyper-aware of every tiny movement she made, every brush of her body against his as they moved together.

He relaxed after a few moments, his hands flexing on her hips as he began to move with her. He shifted closer, so close his mouth brushed her forehead, and ran his hands down her arms in one smooth caress, taking her hands in his.

El shivered beneath his touch, opening her eyes and lifting them to his, face softening as she watched him close his eyes and sing along to the music, his voice swallowed by the others noises around them.

She stared at his mouth, her own suddenly dry and had the unshakeable urge to kiss him. She rose on her toes, pulling her hand from his and placing it on his shoulder to steady herself.

Mike jolted at her touch, eyes popping open and staring down at her. He was stunned by the hungry look in her suddenly focused eyes as she moved in closer, her eyes meeting his before they fell back to his lips.

His eyes widened as she leaned in, hands tightening on her hips as her lips hovered over his own.

El let out a quiet 'oomph' as she was suddenly knocked from behind and fell forward, her lips falling onto his chin instead of her intended target. She frowned, disgruntled and slightly confused by what had happened, turning to look at the group of men behind them.

Mike felt the same and glared at the guy who knocked into El before sighing, rubbing a hand on his neck and gently taking her hand in his, tugging her off the dance floor.

'Come on, let's get you home.'

Despite El's protests, they grabbed Dustin from the bar and made their way to the car. El was asleep almost before they pulled away from the club, all the energy she'd gained from the alcohol draining from her.

Dustin glanced back at Mike, who had chosen to sit in the backseat with El, and pressed his lips together at the sight of El's head sprawled in his lap, Mike's hand on her head as he absent-mindedly brushed his fingers through her soft curls.

Dustin quickly turned his attention back to the road, knowing if Mike saw him he'd be mortified.

Mike shook her awake when they reached the apartment and El just batted at his hands, not wanting to move.

Dustin gave a loud laugh and crouched down beside her. El looked up at him blearily, groaning slightly and closed her eyes.

'Want me to give you a piggy back?' he asked, tilting his head at her.

El nodded tiredly and staggered out of the car, yawning loudly, before climbing onto Dustin's offered back, laying their limply.

Mike followed them up the stairs, hands pressed to her back to make sure she didn't slide off on the walk up, and was more than relieved when they finally reached their apartment, quickly inserting the key and opening the door.

Dustin lowered El to the floor and she stumbled inside, the boys following her inside, kicking off her heels with a sigh of relief.

'Yay, home', she said, stretching her arms before she lowered her hands to the bottom of her dress and pulled it over her head, leaving her in nothing but a white bra and pink underwear.

Dustin spun around quickly, his hands in his hair before he lowered them to cover his wide eyes like a child.

'Oh my god, oh my god!'

Mike sighed, shaking his head at Dustin, exasperated and quickly pulled his shirt over his head.

'Come on, El', he said, swallowing hard, throat suddenly dry as he tried to drag his eyes from her half-naked body. But he couldn't look away.

He'd always known she was tiny, but he had never noticed how fragile and graceful her limbs were, long and slim like a ballet dancers. Her curves were subtle and small, but he thought they were perfect, that she was perfect in every way. She had tiny scars lining

her body, especially the inner curve of her elbow, but he barely noticed them, instead fascinated by the smattering of freckles on her arms and shoulders that he'd never seen before, always covered by her clothes.

He noticed a smug of black of her wrist and quickly turned his eyes away. His mother had always taught him that soul marks were private and should only be looked at if the person offered to show you.

Mike lifted his eyes away from El with great difficult and walked forward to tug his shirt over her head, covering her. It was way too big and swamped her adorably, the bottom falling below her knees and the sleeves flopping over her wrists.

El looked up at him adoringly before she turned and stumbled to the couch, falling face down onto it with a happy sigh.

Dustin turned back as he heard El land on the couch, letting out a relieved noise as he saw she was now covered.

'Okay then...' he said, clapping Mike on the shoulder and shifting towards his room, 'have fun.'

'What? You can't leave me alone', Mike said, panicking and grabbing the back of Dustin's shirt, forcing him to a halt in front of him.

He couldn't be alone with El now. Not with his mind still whirling from his conversation with Dustin earlier.

Dustin shook his head at Mike, his turn to be exasperated and pulled away from his grip to grasp his shoulder.

'Mike, you're going to be fine. I know you like her and you're really messed up about it right now, trying to figure things out, but she needs someone to look after. I'd stay and help if I could but I already have to be up for work in five hours.'

El sat up abruptly, causing both of them to jump, swinging around to look at her. Her face was suddenly white as she pressed a hand to her mouth, throat bobbing.

'I think I'm going to be sick', she choked out, running to the bathroom and slamming the door shut behind her.

They both stared after her, exchanging wide-eyed looks before Dustin patted him on the shoulder.

'Good luck', he said, as he walked to his room and closed the door behind him.

Mike took a deep breath, nerves making stomach pitch and flutter uncomfortably, as he looked apprehensively at the bathroom door. He hesitated in front of it, his hand raised to knock before he lifted his chin and rapped on the door.

El needed him. He couldn't just abandon her because he was freaking out and trying to work out his feeling for her.

The nerves quickly faded, replaced by worry when El didn't answer, only silence on the other side of the door.

'Uh...El, you okay?' he asked, pressing his ear to the door.

The sound of her being sick filled the air and Mike winced in sympathy, hurriedly turning the door handle and letting himself into the bathroom.

El was slumped against the toilet which she reached up to the flush, her face a sickening shade of green and a sheen of sweat covering her forehead. She slowly opened her eyes and looked at him in the doorway, before groaning and turning her face away, burying them in her arms.

'No....go away', she mumbled, beyond mortified.

Mike barely bit back a laugh and walked over the sink, filling a glass of water and wetting a face cloth. He crouched down beside El, lifting her curls up and placing the cool cloth against the back of her neck, like his Mom used to when he was sick.

El moaned gratefully and rested her head against her arms, letting her eyes drift shut.

Mike sat down beside her, rubbing soothing circles on her back as he leant against the bathtub, stretching his long legs out in front of him.

'Feeling better?'

'No', El grumbled, as another wave of nausea sent her leaning over the toilet, dry gagging, her stomach muscles squeezing painfully, as if trying to wring her dry. But there was nothing more to come out.

She definitely did not feel better. Her muscles felt weak and limp, and she felt sticky from the layer of sweat that seemed to cover her from head to toe. She swallowed, grimacing at the furry feeling coating her tongue, her entire mouth tasting like an ashtray and gave another moan.

'I'm sorry,' she said, lifting her head to look at Mike...or more correctly, at the two of him sitting in front of her. El blinked slowly, frowning, trying to bring him into focus.

Mike shook his head with a smile and held out the glass of water.

'Don't be. We've all been here before. Trust me, Dustin after a night out is way worse than this.'

El took the glass from him and chugged it down until it was empty, sighing with relief as it settled the roiling in her stomach, the nauseous squeezing calming slightly.

'Thank you', she said, voice raspy as she set the glass down heavily on the floor, clinking loudly against the tile and almost tipping over.

Mike quickly righted it, placing it back on the counter before it could be knocked again.

He turned back to look at her and was stunned by how close she suddenly was, her face inches from his as she tilted her head at him, her eyes tracing his face. He stared at her, dazed by how pretty her eyes looked under the bright light and could only blink, frozen in place, when she lifted a hand and ran a gentle finger down his nose.

She smiled then, her eyes bright and warm as she leant back against the toilet.

'You have stars on your face. They're pretty....you're pretty, Mike.'

Mike blinked at her, bewildered.

'Uh...thanks?' he said, eyes wide.

'You're welcome', El said primly, before slumping against the toilet, her head bobbing dangerously close to the porcelain base.

Mike scrambled forward and quickly caught her head before she could hurt herself, wrapping an arm around her waist to help tug her to her feet.

'Okay, time to get you to bed', he said as they began to walk to her room, El leant against him heavily.

'Oh, yes please', she said, giggling loudly and winking at him.

Mike froze, his dark eyes flying open in shock and mouth going slack as he stared down at her. El laughed even harder at the shocked look on his face, poking a finger into his bare side.

'You're silly, Mike.'

'That was...I didn't mean that', he stuttered, opening her door and walking her over to the bed, trying desperately not to imagine what she had just suggested.

So not the time brain, he thought as images flashed through his mind, mouth going dry as his body hardened, the familiar burning beginning to stir to life in his lower belly.

El, completely oblivious to the thoughts she had just awoken, wrapped her arms around her pillow, sinking into the mattress with a happy sigh.

Mike was so nice, she thought, drowsily as she blinked up at him, eyes trying to slide shut. He looked after her and gave her water. She liked Mike.

El reached up and brushed his hair out of his face, startling him from his runaway thoughts as his eyes snapped down to hers,

unconsciously leaning into her touch.

El smiled sleepily before letting her eyes slide shut.

'I wish you were him', she mumbled sleepily, burying her face into her pillow with a small moan.

Mike frowned, barely catching her words, and leant down closer to listen, sure he'd heard wrong.

'Wish I was who?' he asked, confused, but El was already fast asleep, her hair covering her face as she hugged her pillow, snoring quietly.

Mike felt his face soften as he watched her, reaching out to brush her hair away from her face. She looked so adorable, her cheek flushed and hair a mess, looking almost child-like in sleep, relaxed in a way he rarely saw her. How did he ever get so lucky as to have her in his life?

It had felt so right caring for her tonight, like it was something he was meant to do. Like he was supposed to care for her and make her happy always. And, more than that, he wanted. Because he loved her.

Mike stumbled back, mind racing and heart beginning to pound as he felt a distinct click inside him, the realisation hitting like a ton of bricks as he stared down at El.

Oh my god, he was no longer falling for her. He was completely in love with El!

It had come on so fast, so out of the blue, that he hadn't recognised it for what it was. But she had become his everything in only a few months, and he knew he wouldn't survive without her in his life.

He didn't need to decide, something inside him already had long before this moment. And it had chosen her, knowing he loved and needed her even before he did.

'I love El Hopper', he said quietly, and felt his face spread into a massive grin, all the nerves and doubts that had sprung up inside him melting away completely at the rightness of those words.

I'm sorry, he said softly, feeling his heart break slightly as he silently let go of the girl on the other side of the wall. He couldn't wait for her anymore. He had to take what the world had offered him, the chance of a life with the girl he was in love with, a girl who was selfless and kind, fun and stubborn, strong and brave and so beautiful he sometimes ached looking at her.

He couldn't let that go, let her go for a what if. You'd have to be stupid to let El go, and Mike Wheeler was definitely not stupid.

He reached down with shaking hands and tucked her blanket around her, face gentle as he leant down and pressed a soft kiss to her forehead.

'Night, El', he whispered, instead of the three words he wanted to tell her, something inside him holding him back. It wasn't the right moment, but he knew it would be soon. He just had to be patient.

He turned and left the room, coming back only a few minutes with his pillow and a blanket, spreading them down on the floor beside her bed and laying down quietly, not wanting to leave her, afraid she would be sick again in her sleep.

Mike stared up at the dark ceiling, listening to the comforting sound of her even breathing beside him, and smiled to himself in the dark as he closed his eyes and let sleep pull him away.

**

El came awake with a groan, burying her face in the pillow to try to block on the sunlight that beamed down at her, almost as if it was punishing her for drinking too much. She gingerly sat up after a few moments, feeling like she'd been hit by a truck as she'd raised a hand to her pounding head, squeezing her eyes shut. Her stomach was raw and aching, churning and squeezing queasily in a way that told her she had definitely been sick at one point during the night.

Argh. I hate you, Lucas, she thought, mentally giving him the finger as she lay there, sure she was slowly dying.

'Oh god,' she moaned, opening her eyes slowly and glancing blearily

around the room, her fuzzy mind straining to remember anything from the night before. But the memories stayed just out of reach, blurry and instinct.

Well, at least I'm home, she thought as she pushed her hair back from her face, sniffing it and grimacing. Augh, she really needed a shower.

She kicked her covers off and stilled, eyes widening, when she found she wasn't wearing her dress from the night before but, instead, a striped blue and white shirt that definitely wasn't hers.

What had she done last night?

She lifted her covers and quickly located her phone where she'd left it last night, dialling Lucas's number. Her head seemed to pulse along with every ring until mercifully Lucas answered, cutting off the noise with a loud curse.

'Argh, what do you want?'

El pressed a hand to her head, glaring at the phone, hoping he could feel it.

'You have no idea how happy it makes me to know you feel as shit as I do right now. Thanks for ditching me last night, by the way', she said, voice deliberately loud.

She heard Lucas groan and then his voice got closer to the phone, growling at her.

'Stop yelling at me', he said, tone pained, 'If you're just going to keep yelling, I'm hanging up.'

'Why are you so cranky? Didn't you get laid last night?' El asked, glancing over and seeing a glass of water seated on the table and grabbed it eagerly, chugging it down and sagging as it soothed her burning throat.

'I didn't sleep with her.'

El choked on the water as Lucas's words registered, coughing as she jolted upright, gritty eyes wide. She flinched as her head throbbed

from the movement but pressed the phone harder against her ear, unable to believe what she'd just heard.

'What?'

Lucas sighed into the phone and she could hear the sheets rustling as he shifted to a seated position.

'I couldn't do it. I couldn't hurt Will like that. When we got back to my apartment I just paid the driver to take the girl home and went to bed. I haven't...slept with anyone else since I found out we were soul mates.'

El was speechless for a second, blinking owlishly.

'Holy shit, is my Lucas finally growing up?' she teased, though she was secretly proud of him.

'Shut up', Lucas told her but he couldn't quite hide the smile in his voice, 'I'm going back to bed now until my head stops feeling like it's going to explode. So...I'll probably see you again in two years', he said, quickly hanging up.

El shook her head at him, amused, before throwing the phone down on the bed as she stumbled to her feet and out of her room. She followed the smell of something delicious cooking into the kitchen her stomach growling. She was surprised to see Mike behind the counter, stirring something on the stove, whistling quietly along to the radio.

He looked up as she perched on one of the stools behind the counter, grinning as she sagged down against it, her head hitting the table with a loud thud.

'Well, good morning'.

El lifted her head and glared at him, squinting in the light as she leant heavily on her arm.

Augh, it was so wrong. No-one should be that...that cheerful this early.

'And how are you feeling?'

El just groaned in answer and Mike laughed, turning back to check on his food.

She watched him move around the kitchen, grinding pepper into a mixture on the stove, looking at the ease in a way he never usually did cooking.

'You're cooking?' she asked, voice incredulous as she stared at him.

Mike turned and gave her a mock-hurt look, the effect completely ruined by the happiness shining in and warming his eyes.

'You'll be taking back your doubtful words when you try my scrambled eggs. My breakfasts are legendary,' he said dramatically, gesturing at the pan grandly.

El gave a small laugh, wincing when her head throbbed, but it didn't weaken the smile that brightened her face.

He grinned at her, before his smile changed into one more sheepish.

'Actually, it's the only food I can cook without burning it', he said, as he held out the the pan, filled to almost overflowing with fluffy white eggs, 'You hungry?'

El thought about it before a second before she made an involuntary gagging noise that made him step back, eyes wide.

'I'll take that as a not right now. Coffee? Water?' he asked, as he held up a steaming mug, the delicious smell of coffee wafting towards her.

'Both. A galloon worth of both', she said, reaching out for it with both hands so eagerly Mike chuckled, 'Just pour it down my throat...or inject it. Whatever's quicker.'

'Sorry, I don't have any needles on me right now so you'll just have to take it the regular way', he said, handing her the mug and opening his hand to reveal two aspirin he had hidden inside.

El gave a put-upon before taking a sip of coffee, moaning happily,

before she swallowed back the aspirin.

'This is so amazing. I bloody love you right now'.

Mike's breath hitched at her words, quickly coughing to cover his reaction and pretending to check on the scrambled eggs so she didn't see how much her words had affected him.

'Oh my god, what did I do last night? How did I even get back here?' she asked, face scrunching slightly, as if she was dreading the answer.

Mike glanced back at her, his lips twisting up in amusement.

'You don't remember?'

El shook her head slowly, trying not to jar her head, and looked at him expectantly, eyes squinting, waiting for the worst.

'You called us and we came to get you. After that we spent some time in the bathroom together where you threw up and then I put you to bed. There was nothing too embarrassing. By the way, did you get the water I left you?'

El moaned, pressing her hands to her cheeks as mortified heat rushed into them, unable to meet his eyes as she resisted the urge to crawl back to her room and hide forever.

She dropped her hands however when she realised what he'd just revealed, blinking up at him in surprise.

'Wait...you looked after me?' she asked, butterflies coming to life inside her when he turned, his dark eyes meeting hers.

'Well...yeah, but it wasn't a big deal', he said, shrugging at her.

El looked at him for a long moment before she ducked her head, hiding the way her eyes glistened with tears and her lips trembled, knowing he would be embarrassed and worried if he saw how much his actions meant to her.

No-one other than Joyce had ever looked after when she was sick. It made her want to cry to think that he did it without a single thought,

just cause he wanted to. He was always taking care of her, in one way or another.

She quickly cleared her throat to hide the tears that made her voice scratchy and lifted her head, giving a forced laugh.

'I am so sorry you had to go through that. I'm so embarrassed', she said, turning her head away slightly.

Mike watched her, seeing the tears she tried to hide, his heart aching but let it go, not wanting to upset her further and gave a deliberate laugh.

'It's okay. I didn't mind.'

They were silent for a few awkward moments before El turned back, emotions now under control, and asked one of the questions that she had been trying to work out since she'd woken.

'Okay...I have a few questions....like whose shirt am I wearing?'

Mike's cheeks went red and he shifted awkwardly, rubbing at the back of his neck with a slight chuckle.

'Uh...that's mine. You kind of...decided to strip in front of us last night.'

El blanched, mouth hanging open, her face then going as red as a tomato as she turned to hop off the stool.

'Excuse me...I'm just going to go throw myself off the roof now. Bye.'

Mike laughed, reaching over and grabbing her hand, pulling her back around.

'No, come back. It's fine, I swear. You don't have to be embarrassed'.

'Are you serious? I just gave Dustin fodder to tease me for months. Years even. I think the roof is the better choice.'

'He won't tease you, I'll make sure of it.'

He let go as she settled back on the stool reluctantly and walked back over to dish out breakfast.

El glanced around and groaned when she caught her reflection in the metal toaster, raising her hands to her wild hair that was sticking up in all directions, horrified.

'Oh, jeez, I look terrible. Why didn't you tell me?' she moaned, futilely trying to brush her curls down flat.

Mike watched her, taking in her messy hair that seemed to halo her head, her honey brown eyes glowing in the early morning sunlight even despite the dark circles that hung beneath them, wearing his over-sized shirt and thought she had never looked more beautiful.

'You look perfect', he said, the words slipping out before he even realised he had thought them.

El's eyes lifted to his, surprise widening them as she stared at him. Mike's face felt like it was aflame but he didn't look away, his dark eyes steady on hers, hoping she could see everything he couldn't yet say aloud in his eyes.

She looked at him for a long moment, before her lips curved up into the half-smile he loved, pink rising on her cheekbones. He smiled back at her, cheeks creasing with it, before he turned back and focused on breakfast, not even bothering to pretend he wasn't deliriously happy.

El's insides squirmed, but in the best way, as she looked at him, her face softening ever more at the grin he didn't even try to hide from her.

I love you, she thought suddenly, the words almost slipping off her tongue. Her heart skipped a beat as her thought registered, giving a sharp intake of breath as she dropped her fork, vaguely hearing it clink against the plate.

Oh.

Well, there it was. The thing she had been missing these last few weeks. Months even. The reason she always felt breathless whenever

she looked at him or turned to find his eyes on her. Why her heart always raced around him, why her hands grew sweaty and why she always wanted to be with him, even when they were only separated by one room.

She was in love with him.

El stared at his back as he bobbed slightly to the music from the radio on the counter, singing quietly under her breath and grinned as giddiness rose inside her.

I'm in love with Mike, she thought, barely resisting the urge to shout it at the top of her lungs or to dance around the room.

Her smile fell away slightly when she felt a pang of guilt deep inside her, simmering beneath the happiness. She couldn't ignore it, the guilt for her soul mate, the boy she loved as well, though she'd never said it aloud or even admitted to herself before now. But she knew she couldn't keep hiding. There would always be a part of her that ached for Him, for the soulmate she knew she had always loved, but couldn't hold onto, not after everything she'd already put him through. He deserved better than a soulmate who might lift the block one day.

And... truthfully...she loved Mike more. So much she felt like she couldn't breathe at the mere thought of losing him. Dustin and he had both brought her back to life but Mike...he made her want live again. He was everything to her.

But...could she really take this chance?

As she looked at him, watching as he moved around the kitchen, everything good within him seemed to shine through. He was so kind and patient, always teaching her and explaining things she didn't understand without a single hint of judgement. He was also completely selfless, always making sure she was safe and looking out for her in a way she'd never known from anyone else. He was the best person she'd ever met.

Of course, she had fallen in love with him.

As he turned back around, humming as he scooped scrambled eggs onto her plate, the breakfast he had made knowing she would be too sick to do anything today, she felt a quiet click inside her, a decision made, and knew she wanted to try.

'Here you go', he said, putting some onto his own plate before he walked around the counter to take a seat beside her.

He paused with his fork lifted halfway to his mouth as he saw El looking at him, an emotion he couldn't quite place softening her face, making his heart race.

'Everything alright?' he asked, frowning in concern.

El nodded, giving a small smile as she lifted her fork to her mouth.

'Everything's perfect,' she told him, taking a bite and groaning in appreciation, digging in ravenously.

Mike grinned back at her as they began to eat in easy silence, both unaware that they had come to the same realization and were keeping the same secret.

Notes for the Chapter:

> So what did everyone think? As always let me know!! I'm so excited to get your reviews!! - Katie xoxo

11. Chapter 11

Notes for the Chapter:

> Hey guys! OMG, so this is such a huge chapter! I'm actually quite nervous about it. Anyways, I hope you enjoy it! - Katie xoxo

El stared blankly at the television from her spot laying on the couch, not even seeing what was on the screen as her brain seemed to fuzz and sputter from boredom.

She couldn't remember a time when she had been more bored. The apartment was completely silent, as it had been for most of the day. Dustin had left earlier that morning for a weekend getaway with his girlfriend, who they still hadn't met, and Mike had been hidden away in his room since after breakfast.

El had been left with nothing but boring day time television and her own thoughts, paranoid thoughts that were slowly driving her crazy.

She glanced at Mike's closed door for what felt like the two hundredth time that day and let out a quiet groan, smacking her head back against the arm of the couch.

Ugh, this is not normal, El Hopper, she thought, squeezing her eyes shut and barely resisting the urge to pull her hair out. You can't want to be with one person every second of every day, it's not healthy.

But...she did. Ever since El had realised she was in love with Mike, he was all she could think about. And Mike...Mike obviously needed his space.

He'd been acting weird, all jumpy and nervous, and been avoiding her ever since that night when Dustin and he had picked her up from the club. Now all she seemed to do was worry about why. What if she'd said or done that had upset him or had been so mortifying or inappropriate that he felt awkward around her now.

Oh god, what if she'd come onto him? Or told him she loved even

before she'd realised it?

But what was even more confusing was the looks she sometimes caught him giving her when he thought she wasn't looking. When he wore an expression she'd never seen before that softened his face and which made her feel warm and squirmy inside. But in the best way.

'Oh god', El moaned, burying her face in her hands.

She just wished she knew what he was thinking. Why did guys have to be so hard to read?

El drummed her feet against the bottom of the couch for a few more minutes, biting her nails anxiously before she gave up with an annoyed huff and pushed to her feet. She quickly walked to her room and picked her brown purse up off the end of her bed, before slipping a pair of brown sandals onto her feet.

She needed to get out of the apartment for a few hours and clear her mind before she really went crazy.

She walked past Mike's room on her way out of the apartment and paused despite the voice inside her telling her to keep walking, looking at the closed door with a torn expression, her lips pursing out slightly.

She gave a heavy sigh, deeply disappointed with herself, as she lifted a hand and knocked lightly on the door, though everything else inside her buzzed with excitement from the action.

You are hopeless! she chastised herself half-heartedly, her heart skipping a beat as she heard Mike's voice came through the door telling her to come in.

El took a deep breath, squeezing her eyes shut for a second before she opened the door and stepped inside.

She'd never been in Mike's room, she realised as she moved inside, glancing around curiously.

The walls were painted a pale blue and plastered with posters from films, some El recognised like Back to the Future, the Goonies and

Star Wars, and some she didn't. His queen-sized bed sat in the middle of the room, the dark blue comforter spread across it rumpled and un-made. She was surprised by how clean his room was, having seen the disaster area Dustin called a room, the only mess being the pile of dirty clothes in one of the corners. His bookcase sat against the far wall and was filled with hundreds of different comics, all carefully wrapped in individual plastic sleeves for protection.

Mike looked up distractedly from where he was slumped over his desk and straightened, his concentrated frown smoothing out into a crooked smile, expression welcoming.

He felt like he hadn't seen her and quickly soaked her in, feeling like he was breathing easy for the first time in forever.

She was so pretty, he thought as she looked at her in the afternoon light shining in from his windows. Her curls were pulled back by a blue headscarf with was only made brighter by the cream-coloured embroidered tunic and blue skirt she was wearing with it.

He shifted nervously on his seat, his eyes skittering away from hers

Mike hadn't been alone with El for over a week. In fact, he had been actively avoiding such situations, though it had been killing him to be apart from her after his realisation only seven days before. And he knew from the hurt and confused looks El had been sending him that she'd definitely noticed. He obviously hadn't been as subtle as he'd hoped.

His chest tightened with guilt for putting her through what he knew was unnecessary worry and pain, but he deliberately pushed it away, resolving firming inside him. No, he wouldn't feel guilty. He was doing it for all the right reasons. He was trying to be a gentleman!

He had been hiding in his room everyday trying to work up the courage to tell her he loved her, to ask her to be his girlfriend. He'd been rehearsing the words over and over in his head, wanting every word to be perfect. And he knew that if he was around El before he finally got up the nerve to tell her everything he wanted to, he wouldn't be able to stop himself from kissing her. And once he started, he knew he'd never be able to stop, even to tell her he loved

her.

He was barely resisting the urge to kiss her now, for god’s sake. Where's your self-control, Wheeler?

No, he definitely needed to get the words out first.

Okay...play it cool, Mike, he thought, struggling to strike a pose that seemed casual.

Oh my god, you look like a moron, he groaned, shaking his head as he sagged in his chair again, peeking up at her through his fringe, cringing slightly, expecting her to be looking at him like he was crazy.

But El wasn't looking at him like he was crazy. In fact she hadn't seemed to notice his odd behaviour at all, instead wandering around his room, lifting figurines off the bookcase, running her fingers along the spines of his comics.

Her lips twitched up at the Yoda figurine on the shelf, bobbing it on the head with her finger as she read the titles of the comic books lining his shelf. Her smile grew even bigger as she saw they owned a lot of the same comics and books, the now familiar warmth spreading through her at the realisation and how alike they were.

She stopped as she reached his desk, her head snapping down as she gawked down at the bulky object sitting atop it among his books.

'Oh, that's a...'

'A Supercom', El said, grinning as she began to flick the switches, bouncing slightly in excitement when it came to life, 'Ooh, it works! I had one when I was sixteen but it got broken. This is so damn cool.'

Mike grinned at her enthusiasm, grabbing a photo on his desk of him and Dustin is a basement, both of them hiding behind opposite couches as they held the Supercoms to show her.

'Dustin and I both got them for Christmas one year and used them constantly. We still use them sometimes if we're too lazy to walk to each other’s room.'

El took the photo, giggling at Dustin's missing front teeth and Mike's gangly frame, looking like a baby giraffe.

'You two were so cute', she teased, giggling when he groaned, hiding his face in one hand and peeking out at her, his cheeks reddening, 'No, seriously, it must be nice to have the same friend for so long'.

She placed the frame back on the desk carefully before glancing down at his textbooks curiously, forehead furrowing slightly.

'What are you doing?'

Mike reached up to rub at his sore eyes, tired from hours of reading and put down the highlighter he still held in his left hand, where he'd been tossing it from hand to hand before she'd walked in, about to give up.

'Studying. I have finals next week, and I have to try and memorise all of this stuff before then. It's killing me', he told her, running a hand through his hair in frustration, before flicking her a curious look of his own, 'Why were you wondering?'

El's sent him a sympathetic look and perched on the edge of his desk, playing with the edges of her hair.

'Dustin's out again and I really don't feel like cooking anything tonight. I was going to see if you maybe...if you wanted to come and grab something to eat but...if you're busy...' she said, rising to her feet as she bit her lip, slowly beginning to back out of the room.

Mike jumped to his feet, holding a hand out to stop her from leaving.

'No, no, I'll come. I... I could use a break', he said, flushing bright red, mortified by how pathetically eager he must look.

El's lips, however, pulled up into a smile at Mike's eagerness, her expression brightening.

'Okay...cool. There's this night market that is just a few blocks away if you want to walk there?'

Mike smiled back.

'Sounds good', he said, grabbing a clean jacket off his bed and shrugging it on, following El out of his room as she smiled at him over her shoulder, crooking a finger at him.

They walked down the four flights of stairs and into the fading afternoon sunlight, the air still warm despite the setting sun. They walked side by side, their hands brushing every few seconds, causing them both to jolt and smile at each other sheepishly, cheeks pink.

After a few minutes of silence, El turned and rummaged inside her bag, pulling out an 8track cassette player. She silently offered Mike an earphone and he smiled, taking it and placing it in his ear. El pressed play, and they walked along, their heads bobbing along.

Mike found himself surprised by her eclectic taste in music as the song changed from the Clash to Frank Sinatra in under three minutes.

'This is such awesome music. Where did you get the tapes?'

El looked up at him, startled by his sudden question and her eyes dulled slightly, causing Mike's heart to skip, worry filling him, though a small smile still curved her lips.

'It's a mixtape. My brother made it for me. Did I ever tell you about him?'

When Mike shook his head, El gave a sad smile, sighing.

'Jonathan...he's the greatest. He's the son of my foster Mom, Joyce, and he is obsessed with music. He has the best taste. He used to make me all sorts of mixtapes for when I was having a bad day or to calm me down after.... after I had nightmares.'

'Before...when I lived alone, I mean, I used to walk for hours just listening to these mixtapes. Not talking to anyone, or doing anything. Just walking and listening. They were the only things I really took from home and they...they kept me going.'

Mike felt a pang of sadness inside him, and looked over at her, his lips pulling down, as he remembered how fragile and broken she'd been they'd first met, hating that she had been so alone and in so much pain for so long.

He reached over and took her hand in his, before he squeezed gently, his eyes soft and full of understanding.

'I'm sorry that you were hurting.... that you went through everything you did. I wish I could change that.'

El squeezed his hand back, shaking her head quickly.

'Don't be. I wouldn't be here if all the bad stuff hadn't happened. And I... I wouldn't have met you. I'm happy now, Mike', she said, her eyes steadfast on his, alive with joy.

Mike lips pulled back up, eyes soft and shifted closer, lifting an arm and letting it hover over her shoulder for a second before he hesitantly wrapped an arm around her.

El immediately moved in closer, burrowing into his side and sighing in contentment. Mike hid his grin in her curls as they walked along through the crowds of late night shoppers and commuters on their way home and towards the markets.

When they reached the markets they slowly made their way through the lines of stalls, taking in the array of foods, clothes, candles and hand-made jewelry and woodworks, still hand-in hand. After an hour they finally found a hotdog cart settled under the shelter of a few trees near where couples were dancing together on a grassy opening.

They quickly bought two, Mike insisting on paying and wandered over to set of swings settled along the edge of the clearing, swinging back and forth as they ate their hotdogs ravenously.

As Mike finished the last bit of his hotdog he glanced over at El who was watching the dancers longingly, eyes faraway.

'So... did you...come here a lot? I mean, before?'

El turned to look at him and nodded happily.

'Almost every Friday night. I loved to watch the dancing and the live music', she said, lifting her chin towards where a brown-haired woman and blond man were singing and playing guitar on a small stage.

The song abruptly changed, switching to a familiar melody that drifted over to them across the grassy area as the sun began to set behind them.

El began to sing along, her voice sweet and high as she swung back and forth on the swing, her skirt fluttering around her ankles as her hair flew behind her.

‘We were born before the wind, also younger then the sun…’

Mike swallowed, watching her, and he suddenly knew. It was time. Now was the moment he'd been waiting for her. He was going to tell her how he felt.

He swallowed nervously again, throat so dry he would've killed for a glass of water, feeling like his entire life was about to change forever.

This is it, he thought, taking a deep breath and rose to his feet, standing in front of her.

El lifted her head, looking at him as she rocked back and forth, hands wrapped around the chains, head tilted.

‘Dance with me?’ he asked nervously, holding out a trembling hand to her.

El’s eyes lit up and she nodded eagerly, putting her hand in his. She bit her lip to try and hold back the ecstatic smile spreading across her face. But she couldn’t and Mike smiled softly when he saw it as they walked out.

Mike spun her around in a circle spontaneously and El threw her head back laughing so contagiously he laughed along with her. He pulled her back in close into his arms, settling one hand on her waist, the other wrapped around her hand. El grinned up at him and rested her other lightly on his shoulder as they began to sway, her head barely reaching the middle of his chest.

They moved back and forth for a while among the other couples, content with each other’s company. After a while El lifted her head and looked at him, a teasing light in her eyes.

‘Where did you learn to dance?’

Mike grimaced, groaning quietly, but his eyes were warm with humour.

‘My sister used to make me practice with her all the time. It was… horrible…’ he said, shuddering dramatically as he remembered how mortified twelve-year-old him had been at having to put his hands on his sister’s waist.

El laughed at his expression, reaching up to curl her fingers into the hair at the back of his neck, her heart speeding up as she heard his breath hitch, bringing his eyes back to hers.

‘I’m sure it was. But just so you know, it definitely paid off.’

He grinned, face softening at her words, and moved in closer, resting his chin on top of her head and breathing in the scent of wildflowers that always clung to her hair as he closed his eyes.

El sighed contentedly, nuzzling into his chest as they swayed.

Mike lifted his head after a moment, taking a deep breath and pulled back to look at her. El blinked at the abrupt loss of his warmth and looked up at him, her eyebrows drawn together.

When she saw the hungry, determined look in his eyes she drew in a shuddering breath, eyes widening as the hand on his neck tightened in surprise. Mike leant down slowly, his eyes never leaving as his lips hovered over hers.

El’s own eyes fluttered close, every inch of her skin feeling like it was electrified, aware of every breath he took and his hands warm and heavy at her waist.

Mike paused, reluctantly pulling away from her, knowing if he kissed her now, he would never be able to stop and he would lose his nerve to tell her how he felt. No, he needed to tell her first. Now before anything else happened. He wanted her to know how he felt first, he wanted to be sure she knew he was serious about her, that she was the only one he’d ever wanted in his life. The only girl he was sure he’d ever want again.

El opened her eyes after a few seconds of nothing, disappointed, frowning slightly, not understanding what was happening. Why had he stopped? Had she done something wrong?

Her frown only deepened when she saw the strange look on his face, nerves and anticipation flashing through his eyes, warring for control.

'Is everything okay?' she asked, eyebrows drawing together as she raised a hand to brush a curl from out of her face, causing the sleeve of her white tunic to fall down her arm and catch in the curve of her elbow.

Mike opened his mouth to tell her, the words on the very tip of his tongue when his eyes zeroed in on the black mark on her wrist. Her soul mark.

A strangled noise escaped his throat as the words he'd been rehearsing for days stuck there, his eyes widening and heart beginning to pound furiously in his chest. Time seemed to stop as he stared at the familiar mark, all the noises of the market fading away behind the deafening buzz in his ears.

I can't believe it, he thought, mind frozen, unable to focus on anything but the image in front of him. How…how could this be real?

El stared up at him, bewildered by the shocked look on his face, his mouth hanging open as all colour seemed to drain from his already pale face.

'Mike, what's wrong?' she asked, anxiously, her insides trembling as icy cold dread spread through her at the way he was looking at her. As if he'd never seen her before. Something was very wrong.

Mike shook his head slowly, his eyes gradually coming back into focus as he lifted astounded eyes to hers, before he burst into action, pulling up the sleeve of his shirt so quickly El was worried he'd rip the material.

When he finally got the sleeve up, he took El's arm in his hand,

tugging gently when she tried to pull it back, fear quickly replacing the confusion on her face, and held their arms together.

Their soul marks lay side by side, the constellation of stars identical in every way.

El stared down at them, horrified understanding filling as she glanced from Mike's arm to her own so fast her head began to swim dizzily, her entire body suddenly cold.

No, this couldn't be right. He couldn't.... Mike couldn't be Him. It's not possible, she thought, her hands beginning to shake, throat tightening painfully as the words echoed over and over in her head.

'Eleven?', Mike asked hesitantly, voice shaking, trying to push away the hope that was quickly filling him almost to overflowing, barely able to believe what his eyes were telling him was the truth.

Her eyes, wide and dark with fear and shock, clashed with his, panic filling her as he said her name. Her real name. When she saw Mike's eyes widen at her reaction, understanding filling them, she shook her head frantically, breath hissing in panic as she futilely tried to deny what they both knew was the truth.

It was her, Mike thought, the shocked disbelief that had left him frozen quickly replaced with so much happiness he almost vibrated with it, as he stared down at her in awe, his eyes tracing her features lovingly.

El was Eleven. She was safe, she was here and she...El... was his soulmate. He'd finally found her.

A wave of anguish rushed over El, constricting her lungs until she couldn't breathe as she looked up at him, tears filling her eyes at the adoring look in his eyes.

Why? Why did it have to be him? she thought, a sob escaping her throat as she began to back away, the hole in her chest, the one she hadn't felt in months, ripping open and pulsing painfully with every step she took away from Mike.

No, no, she couldn't do this. She couldn't go through this again. She

couldn’t lose him again…

When he asks me about before, when he finds out the truth of what I did, what I became... her thoughts trailed off, another sob slipping out as she backed away, tears beginning to spill down her cheeks. He would look at her like she’d always feared, with fear and disgust, like he knew she was a monster. She couldn’t do this, couldn’t watch the way he looked at her change, the soft dark eyes she loved going hard with hatred.

She couldn't lose him again. She wouldn't survive it. She had to go now. She needed to run, run away now before she no longer had the strength to leave him.

El took a step back, and then another, face contorting with agony and grief as she held a shaking hand out, warding off his touch. She knew if he touched her she’d never be able to leave, leave him.

Mike’s heart stuttered in his chest, terror causing ice to fill his veins as El began to back away from him, one arm wrapping around her middle as if she trying to hold herself together, afraid she would break, her face so pale she looked grey.

He could feel all the blood begin to drain from his face as his hands began to shake, his mind racing frantically, knowing she was seconds from bolting. He took a careful step towards, his dark eyes pleading as he slowly held a hand out to her, praying she’d take it.

‘El…it’s okay,’ he said softly, though he couldn’t stop his voice from trembling, more scared than he’d ever been in his entire life.

El shook her head at his blurry outline, hot tears coming so fast they were blinding her, robbing her of her last chance to look at him, the boy who had become her everything in so little time. The boy she couldn’t have.

‘No,’ she strangled out, chin wobbling as she spun around and sprinted away from him, her heart breaking with every step, sobs shaking her entire frame as she dodged the shocked people around her and disappeared among them.

‘EL! El, come back’, Mike yelled, racing after her, every step feeling too slow, his legs suddenly like lead as he dashed around people, craning his head frantically, trying to catch sight of her brown curls in the crowd.

His heart slammed painfully against his ribs, breath coming in panicked gasped as he paused in the middle of the crowded market, head swiveling in every direction, desperately trying to find her.

‘Where are you? El!’ he cried, fear choking him, ears straining for her voice above the roar of the crowd in which she disappeared, but there was nothing. Nothing but the silence echoing in his mind and the crippling pain that caused him to rock forward and clutch his knees.

His breath came out in shuddering gasps as he sobbed, tears running down his cheeks and shaking his shoulders.

El’s gone, he thought, burying his face in his hands as he fell back to sit in the dirt, ignoring the shocked stares of the people around him as the empty hole inside that she’d left behind all those years ago seemed to spasm, splitting wide open.

He’d lost her again. And this time, he knew he wouldn’t survive it.

The pain of it was blinding, but Mike stubbornly pushed it aside, shaking his head as he forced himself to feet. He swayed dizzily, his jaw firming as he began to push quickly through the crowd, heading in the direction of the apartment.

He needed to find her…No, he was going to find her, he thought determinedly. He was never going to stop looking for her, no matter how long it took or what he had to do.

He was going to get El back.

Notes for the Chapter:

> I know...I know...Ahhhhh....I'm sorry, guys, please don't hate me! It was so hard for me to write this chapter, I was pretty much in tears the whole time I was typing it but I wouldn't have put you all through

this if it wasn't completely necessary and there was a way around it. With El's characterisation in this story, and her worry and fear that her soulmate will hate her for her past, there was no way she wasn't going to freak out when she found out about Mike. Anyways, I hope you enjoyed and please let me know what you think! Forgive me!!!- Katie xoxo

12. Chapter 12

Notes for the Chapter:

> Hey everyone! OMG, so many emotional reactions to the last chapter! I'm so sorry that I had to put you all through that but the reviews were so amazing so thank you! Love you all! Anyways, here is the chapter everyone has been waiting for! Ahhh, I'm so excited to hear everyone's reactions xxx

‘El!’ Mike cried out as he burst into the dark apartment, eyes scanning the rooms frantically as he searched for her. But there was nothing but the echo of his voice in the empty silence of the apartment. She wasn’t here. She hadn’t come home.

Mike blinked back the tears that stung his eyes as he stumbled to his room, pushing the door open and beginning to pace back and forth, every movement jerky and panicked. His mind raced, his thoughts so fast they were a blur, unable to concentrate on a single one.

Where was she? Where could she possibly have gone?

He’d been running around the city for hours searching and had found no sign of her. It was if she’d disappeared in a puff of smoke. He’d even tried to break through the block despite how futile he knew the effort would be, trying to reach her in any way he could. But, as always, he couldn’t get through.

He’d had no choice but to give up and come home, and though he’d known deep down that she wouldn’t be in the apartment, that it was the last place she’d go, he’d couldn’t help the tiny sliver of hope that he’d walk in and find her safe and waiting. But that hope had been killed the moment he’d stepped inside.

He was such a damn idiot! How did he not know? How did he not realise that El was his soulmate? There were so many similarities between them. The traumatic childhood, the scars all over her body…even her name was a shortened version of Eleven! How could he have been so blind? Moron!

Why did she run away from him? What was he missing, he thought as he remembered the fear in her eyes. There had to be reason.

He didn't know the answer. All he knew in that moment was that he couldn't lose her. Not again.

Mike squeezed his eyes tight, concentrating hard before he opened his mind's eye, staring up at the titanium wall separating him and El, eyes narrowing as determination rose inside him like a flood. He pressed his hand gently against it and felt his heart stutter as the wall seemed to warm under his touch, everything on the other side vibrating and pushing back, as if trying to reach for him.

He backed away slowly, never blinking, never taking his eyes off the wall until it was distant speck. He took a deep breath before letting out a strangled scream and running straight for the wall, pushing everything he had inside him that had been building since the day he first heard her voice, all his fears, all his love for her and all his resolve, into his palms.

As he reached the wall he slammed his hands into the cold steel and stumbled backwards, stunned as it shattered, disintegrating into a million pieces before it faded into dust. His determination and his need had finally focused enough, and wielded enough power, to break for what years had seemed unbreakable.

Mike was dragged back into his body as searing pain stabbed into his mind, gritting his teeth to hold back the scream that threatened to rip from his throat. His head spun dizzily as the pain faded as if it'd never existed, a tsunami of emotions smashing into him and almost knocking him off his feet.

He gasped, stumbling back at the intensity of it, his knees hitting the back of the bed where he landed heavily, eyes wide and expression stunned.

I…I did it, he thought, dazed and half-disbelieving. His immediately closed his eyes and stared at the empty space, stunned to realise the gaping hole that had pulsed inside him for so long was gone, completely healed.

He could finally see the link between them, the glowing rope that connected their two minds, and he gently ran his mental fingers over it, awed by the beautiful blues and golds that swirled together. The link seemed to hum under his touch, almost happily, as if it had been waiting for him.

I actually did it. I broke through the block, he thought, slumping, suddenly weak with relief as he came into his body and traced his fingers over his wrist where his soul mark shone brightly, warmth filling his chest.

Tears suddenly sprung to eyes as a wave of agony rushed over him, causing him to jerk forward, his chest clenching so hard his ribs ached as his throat squeezed tight.

What the hell? Mike thought, wiping at the tears that threatened to run down his cheeks with bewildered confusion before he stilled, shock understanding filling as his hands dropped into his lap.

The fear and misery wasn't his. They were El's!

He could feel her again.

And… she was out there somewhere… crying. Grieving and devastated.

But why? He didn't understand. What was she so afraid of?

Mike's mind instinctively reached for hers, and he sighed with relief when he found her as easily as if he'd been doing it every day of the last four years. His mind brushed against hers gently and almost withdrew at the pain he could feel radiating from her, his heart aching.

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath as he opened the link and spoke to her, praying she would answer.

El?...

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El cried out, her fingers digging into her arms as her body spasmed

against the hard-plastic play equipment she was lying in, pain splintering her mind as she felt the block shatter.

She bit back a scream, slamming a fist against the plastic to try and distract herself as she rode out the wave of pain, squeezing her eyes shut. She curled into a tight ball as the pain abruptly faded, clutching her head as it pulsed dully, breathing hard, her wet eyes popping wide with shock and fear.

No, that wasn't possible...

She shut her eyes quickly and opened her mind eyes, staring up at the space where the titanium wall she had created should sit. But the space was empty. It was gone.

Every thought inside her mind seemed to halt, her head pulsing emptily as fear and horror rushed into her.

It was gone. The wall she'd put between them was gone, splintered into nothingness, her mind completely open to his.

He'd broken through the block, she realised, her heart speeding up in her chest as her breath started coming in fast, unnatural gasps, her head spinning dizzily. She wouldn't be able to hide anymore.

Tears spilled down her cheeks as she rocked back and forth, closing her eyes to block out the grey spots that were beginning to dance in front of her eyes, desperately trying to catch her breath.

This can't be happening, she thought, wrapping her arms around herself as she felt her insides begin to twist nauseatingly as emotions that weren't hers began to trickle into her.

Fear, worry and pain, so much pain, that she burst into fresh tears, her own guilt overriding his emotions, making them fade into the background.

I'm sorry, Mike, she thought, pressing her face into the cool plastic around her, her hair sticking to her wet and sticky cheeks. I'm so sorry...

But she couldn't face him. Couldn't face his questions or the way he

would look at her when he found out about her past. She just knew she wouldn't survive it.

She stilled, her eyes widening as her breath gasped out as she felt the gentle brush of fingers against her mind, like the wings of a butterfly, so soft and fragile she wasn't sure it was there. The touch was so familiar, so comforting, she had to hold herself back from reaching for it. For him.

God, she'd missed it. Missed his touch and his mind reaching for hers, so open, trusting and selfless. She just hadn't realised how much until this moment.

El?...

Her breath stuttered in her chest as Mike's voice drifted into her mind, unsure and shaky.

El's mind reached for him before she could snatch it back, everything inside her reaching for him even when she was trying her hardest to stay away. The link came to vibrant life as her mental fingers brushed it, shining so brightly she had to squint against it, against the swirling colours of blue and gold. Of him and her. Her touch opened her mind fully to his, and now she truly had no place to hide. She had to face him.

She swallowed hard, squeezing her eyes shut before answering, her stomach clenching with a fresh wave of agony.

Mike...how...how did you do that?

Mike sagged, burying his face in his hands as El's voice drifted into his mind, anxious and scared, feeling some of the panic churning his insides settle and fade slightly.

She was okay. She was safe. Now he just needed to find a way to get her to come back. To come back to him.

It doesn't matter...Where are you, El? Are you okay? Why did you run?

I'm...I'm in a park.

El stared up at the green plastic roof of the climbing equipment she was lying inside, where she'd crawled to and broken down after she'd left him.

El, come back. Please.

I can't...I just can't...I'm sorry...

Mike quickly felt the pain inside him bubbling into something else, into a fury and devastation that warred inside, threatening to erupt. He desperately tried to hold it back, not wanting to scare her any more than he could already feel she was but the words exploded out of him before he could stop it, years of frustration and pain overpowering him.

Did you know? That it was me? That I was your soulmate? Were you just playing with me this whole time?

Did he truly mean nothing to her? After everything they'd been through together and how much they had come to mean to each other, how could she just run like that? Just leave him?

El sat up, almost slamming her head against the roof and gaped into the darkness outside the tunnel, before she gritted her teeth, her own fury rising inside her, overwhelming everything else inside her.

Of course I didn't. How can you think that I would do something like that? If I had known it was you.... I never would have set foot into that apartment. I would have run far in the other direction.

But why? I don't understand, El. Why did you block me? What did I do wrong?

El's eyes started to burn as the hurt and pain shaking Mike's voice caused sharp pain to lance through her, leaving her breathless. Her arms tightened around herself as she curled into a tighter ball, her heart shattering. She had never hated herself more than in that moment. She hated that she had hurt him this much and made him doubt how wonderful, kind and sweet he was. How perfect he was.

I'm sorry, I'm so so sorry. You didn't do anything, Mike. Not a single thing wrong. It was me, it was all me. I'm the one who is wrong. I never meant

to hurt you. I... I blocked you to protect you. I was trying to protect you from me. You deserve better than to be stuck with me. You deserve someone who isn't broken...who hasn't done the awful things I have. I blocked you so...you could find someone else...so you would move on. So you would leave me behind, she told him, tears shaking her voice.

Mike's fingers clenched in the sheets of his bed as sorrow tightened his chest, but forcibly pushed it aside, reaching desperately for her, feeling her pulling away. But he couldn't hold back the words that kept pouring out, bottled up for years and years.

What about what I want? What I think I deserve?

Mike... El began, a sob slipping from her lips and along the link without her permission. She slapped a hand over her mouth and curled up inside the tube, holding her sides tight as she tried to hold herself together. She felt like something inside her was ripping away, and was sure she'd die from the pain of it, of losing him again. But she was going to lose him either way. At least this way...she'd never have to see him look at her with hate. She would only have the love.

If you knew what I've done.... you'll hate me, Mike. You won't be able to look at me the same and I... I couldn't survive that. Just let it go. Please. Just let me go.

Why did this have to happen? How could fate be so cruel as to show her what she could have knowing she couldn't ever take it?

Mike's eyes widened and he suddenly straightened as understanding filled him, leaving him breathless. He finally understood. Why she had blocked him all these years, why she had been running all this time and why she was so afraid. She…thought he didn't know about everything, about the laboratories and her past. She thought he'd hate her for it.

Helplessness and regret almost choked him as he realised that she had been running all this time for nothing…

You're wrong, El. I already know what you've done...I know about your past...

El's body jerked up, her eyes widening and tears halting in shock.

W-what?

I read an article...a few years ago, on the investigation of an organisation called the Department of Energy.

El stopped breathing, her nails digging into her palms as she wrapped her arms around her knees, beginning to rock as her heart pounded against her ribs, hands shaking uncontrollably.

No... this couldn't be happening...he couldn't know that name...

Mike's stared down at his own hands as they began to shake, a sudden terror squeezing his throat tight. He swallowed hard and pushed El's emotions back, holding it away from himself so he could concentrate on the words he needed to get out. That he needed her to hear.

The department wasn't real, but a front for a group that were kidnapping children with the sole purpose of turning them into soldiers. They experimented on these kids, hurt them and a lot of them...they didn't survive. The article...it also talked about another organisation, an organisation called the Compound, made up of some of the kids that escaped and professionals within the government. They worked for years, doing whatever was necessary, to take down the organisation and to shut down the labs that were holding the children one by one and to lock away the men who had taken them. You were one of them, weren't you? One of the kids taken, and a member of the Compound?

But he didn't need an answer. He already knew. He had known for a long time, ever since he had read that article a year ago. Even before he'd met her, Mike had known that El, that Eleven, wouldn't have been able to just forget, to leave the others behind. She would've done whatever it took, fought whatever monster, man or otherwise, she needed to set the others free. He'd known that she was part of the organisation, that she'd be fighting. And he'd never been prouder to have her as his soulmate.

El let out a pained cry, slapping a hand to her mouth to try and smother it but she was too late and could feel as it vibrated up the

bond towards Mike.

Oh, god he knew. He knew what she'd done.

Mike jerked upright as her sob echoed in his mind, his heart breaking at the sound. He rose shakily to his feet and began to pace, pulling at his hair anxiously.

Where is she? he thought, running a trembling hand over his face. He just wanted to hold her. He needed to help her, to make sure she was okay. He needed to be there with her. It was killing him that he wasn't.

*Yes...I was...*El said after a few minutes of agonising silence, her voice weak and defeated, like she was confessing to the worst sort of crime and was waiting for him to condemn her.

Mike quickly rushed to reassure her.

El, I could never hate you. Never. You did something extraordinary. You helped save all those kids lives. You survived hell but you still went back, again and again, to help them. I can't imagine what you went through in those labs...Mike shuddered, his insides going cold at the thought of her locked away with those monsters, alone and scared, for six years with no way out...but you took what they taught you and used it to save lives.

El dashed at her wet eyes, her lips trembling as she said the words she knew would change everything.

That wasn't the reason I did it...Not fully, Mike. I... I wanted them to pay. I wanted to hurt them like they hurt me. I'm a monster, Mike.

Mike shook his head stubbornly, feeling her guilt and self-hatred flowing through the bond, denying her words.

You are not a monster, El. You are good, and sweet, and kind and the most selfless person I've ever met. Not many people would do what you did, would be so generous and brave to go back into the place they had been kept a prisoner to save complete strangers. You did what you had to do survive and to rescue others. You're anything but a monster. Those people...they kidnapped you, stole you from your family, kept you prisoner and hurt you over and over for six years. Of course you wanted

them to pay. That doesn't make you a monster. That makes you human.

El bit her lip and stubbornly pushed back the emotion that wanted to rise inside her. The emotion she couldn't afford to have, not when it could be dashed within seconds, with a single word.

You don't understand...

I do. I understand everything. I know what you did, what you had to do. And it doesn't make you a bad person. It makes you the most amazing person I've ever known. You don't have to be alone, El. You think you deserve it, that you need to be punished...don't deny it...he said quickly as he felt her denial along the bond...but it wasn't your fault. None of it.

And believe me when I say you're past doesn't change how I feel about you. Not one little bit. I want to be with you, El. That's never going to change. I want all of you. Every scar, every fear, all of it. All I've ever wanted was you, ever since I first heard your voice in my head as a kid and realised what it meant, who you were to me. Meeting you, knowing you all these months, just made me want to be with you more. Please come back. Come home to me', he begged her, his heart racing as he held his breath, reaching out for her along their bond and caressing the link, sending everything he felt along it. Love, acceptance, hope, and reassurance.

Tears ran down into El's hair as she stared up at the roof, disbelief filling her and something else. The emotion she had been trying to hold back but just seemed to uncurl inside her, growing and growing until she felt she would burst with it.

Hope. It was hope.

He was telling her the truth. She could feel it, could feel his determination, his honesty and the fear he tried to mask but couldn't truly hide from her. He really wanted her. He didn't think she was a monster.

El slowly unravelled from her cramped position and sat up, pushing her hair out of her face as she stared out into the dark park, illuminated by a single street-light. She turned her face down to look down at her soul mark and felt her entire face soften, lifting a hand

to trace the constellation with a loving finger.

El closed her eyes as she felt his mind brush against hers again, comforting and reassuring, letting her know he was there, no matter what she decided and she knew. She couldn't leave him. Deep inside she knew that she would never have been able to leave, to leave him. Not after finding and knowing him. Not after falling in love with him and realising what he meant to her.

And more...she didn't want to. She wanted to be with him. She couldn't live without him. He was everything to her.

I want to be with you too.

Mike was silent for a few seconds before his voice filled her mind, every word dripping with nerves.

So... you'll come back?

El took a deep breath and nodded.

Okay, she said, softly, in both her mind and out loud, feeling the words settle inside her. Never had one word ever felt so right.

I'm coming back, she told him as she climbed out of the play equipment and walked down the stairs into the night, heading for the apartment. Heading back to Mike.

Mike felt his breath leave him in a rush as he slumped forward, stumbling to the bed and sitting down heavily. He felt like he was going to cry as relief rushed into him, leaving him dizzy. She was okay. She was coming back.

He buried his face in his hands and sobbed in relief.

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El stepped into the dark, quiet apartment almost two hours later with a quiet sigh, having gotten lost on her way home, having run further than she first expected. She walked slowly across the living room, seeing nothing but darkness seeping from beneath Mike's door and took a deep breath as she paused in front of the door as she had that

afternoon. But now everything was different. Everything had changed.

Here it goes, she thought and pushed the door open. She blinked for a few seconds, letting her eyes adjust to the thicker darkness and felt her lips curl up into a gentle smile, despite the exhaustion beating at her, feeling emotionally raw and drained, as her eyes landed on Mike where he lay sprawled across the bed, fast asleep.

He looked so young with his dark unruly hair falling into his face, which was pale and exhausted, and his mouth hanging open.

El's face softened and she silently toed her shoes off before walking over to pull the covers of his bed down and climbed in beside him. She slowly, hesitantly, wrapped an arm around his waist and cuddled close, breathing in the familiar lemon scent that clung to the skin at the back of his neck, feeling it drain all the tension from her body.

She lay there in silence for a long time and was just beginning to drift off when she felt him jolt, his breathing changing from relaxed and even to suddenly choppy, and she knew he was awake. She stayed still, suddenly breathless as she felt his hand brush the skin on the back of her hand where it rested against his stomach so gently it made tears spring to her eyes, his touch hesitant as if he wasn't sure she was real.

Mike jerked awake and blinked blearily in the muted darkness, staring blankly at the numbers that glowed on his alarm clock, confused by the urgency that vibrated through his body. The feeling that he needed to be somewhere or that he was waiting for something. Or someone.

As the memories of the last few hours came rushing back, Mike jerked into full wakefulness, his eyes widening.

El! He'd been waiting for El. How could he have fallen asleep?

He stilled, breath catching when he felt a slight weight against his ribs, a small hand holding onto the material of his shirt. His heart began to race, as he slowly lifted his hand from where it rested beside him and hesitantly touched the back of the hand, half-sure that he

was still dreaming, that it couldn't be real. His breath shuddered out when his fingers met soft, warm skin and felt a body shift behind him and press up against him, solid and real.

He gently curled his fingers around the tiny wrist and stared down the five stars that matched his own sitting on her wrist, seeming to twinkle at him.

It was really her. She was here. She had come back, he thought, sagging with joy and relief.

El sighed as Mike's fingers caressed her wrist and rose up to rest her chin on his shoulder, barely resisting the urge to press a kiss to the skin on his neck exposed by his shirt.

It doesn't feel weird or awkward, El thought as they lay together in the quiet, their fingers tangling together and holding on tight, so tight it should've been painful. But it wasn't. It felt right, comfortable and safe. Like they were both where they belonged.

'Did you mean it?' El asked suddenly, the words slipping out without her permission, shockingly loud in the easy silence. Her heart began to race in her chest, awaiting his answer, surprised by how much she really needed to hear it.

It felt like they were the only two people who existed in that moment. Like the whole world was holding its breath alongside her, everything depending on his answer. On the words that were going to change her entire life.

Mike didn't speak for a long moment that felt like it stretched into eternity to El, making her want to squirm and inch away but her hand was caught in his, stopping her. Mike suddenly lifted their joined hands to his mouth and kissed the back of hers softly.

'Every word.'

El's lips trembled as she let out a shuddering breath and leant forward as she'd wanted to and pressed a soft, unsure kiss to the skin on the back of his neck.

Mike shivered at the brush of her lips, his fingers tightening around

hers.

‘Can…can I turn around?’

El swallowed before nodding against his back jerkily, shifting away slightly so that he could roll over.

They stared at each other in the muted darkness, their eyes drinking each other in like it was the first they’d ever seen each other, expressions awed. Mike moved in closer, so close their noses brushed and they almost went cross-eyed but neither dared look away. Or wanted to.

Mike reached up with a trembling and cupped her cheek in her hand as he pushed her hair back from her face while he ran his fingers up and down her arm with the other in a long, soothing caress.

El gave him a tremulous smile as she ran her fingers along his cheek, tracing his freckles as she’d always wanted to, her other hands tangling in his black hair and curling at the back of his neck.

How had she not realised? she wondered silently as her eyes traced his features lovingly. His eyes were the same. Kind, soft and as dark as midnight. The eyes she had seen in her dreams every night in the lab and
so many nights since.

Mike sat up and reached over silently to turn on the lamp before turning back to her. His heart ached, chest tightening almost painfully, as he took in the tear tracks staining her cheeks, her eyes red-rimmed and face still mottled with colour. From the devastated look El was giving him, he was certain his face looked the same.

He gently ran his thumbs under her eyes, catching the wetness that still clung to her lashes.

‘Are you okay?’

EL nodded as she leant her forehead against his with a heavy sigh, wiping away the tears that were drying on his cheeks.

‘I’m alright. I’m sorry, Mike. I’m sorry I ran, both now and then. I’m

just so sorry', she said, squeezing her eyes shut, forcing back tears as shame rushed over her.

She hated that they had missed all this time, and it was all her fault. All because of her misplaced fear. If only she had just spoken to him… She'd knew she'd never stop feeling guilty about it, that she would regret it for her entire life.

Mike shook his head quickly, placing a gentle hand on the back of her neck and running his thumb along her jaw. He put gentle pressure on her chin until she looked at him, her eyes dark and wet with unshed tears.

'It's okay. I understand, El. I just…I wish I could have saved you from all of it. From everything that happened to you. If they hadn't taken you…if I'd told someone that day…if I'd somehow figured it out earlier…we could have found each other so much sooner. We could have had years together already. I'm sorry I couldn't save you…that I couldn't protect you', he said, his eyes dulling with pain and guilt.

El's eyes widened, her own guilt replaced with shock and worry, as she shook her head frantically, rising on her elbow to look at him more fully in the light.

'Mike, it's not your fault. You were just a kid; how could you have known? You can't blame yourself for something you couldn't possibly have changed.'

Mike shook his head, turning his head away as his face crumpled with pain and misery.

El grabbed his hand in hers, squeezing hard, desperately trying to reach him.

'Listen to me, Mike. It wasn't your fault. None of it. Even if you'd been there you couldn't have done anything. No-one could have. They would have gotten me not matter what it took. It's over now. They can't hurt me anymore. We have now. We can start over. That's all that matters'.

When Mike just stared down at the comforter, refusing to meet her

eyes, guilt digging its claws deep into him, El caught his chin in her hand and forced him to look at her, her eyes searching his.

‘How about we make a pact? Forget what happened in the past. It doesn’t matter, none of it does. All that matters is us, here, right now. From now on we promise to protect each other from whatever comes our way. We will fight for each other and we will never let anything tear us apart again. Are you in, Wheeler?’ she said, holding her pinky out in front of him, brown eyes warming as she raised a challenging eyebrow at him, silently begging him to agree and to believe like she did.

To leave their past behind and start again.

Mike looked at her for a moment, his eyes boring into hers, searching for something before his lips twitched up slightly, curving into a small smile that brightened his dark eyes, almost making them glow.

‘I’m in, Hopper’, Mike said, curling his pinkie around hers and pumping once, as he silently vowed that he would do whatever it took to keep that promise. To make sure that El was safe, happy and never in pain for the rest of their lives.

They curled up together on the bed, every inch of them touching, neither of them wanting to be apart. El sighed happy as she burrowed in closer, closing her eyes as she relaxed against his completely.

Mike nuzzled his head against hers, his nose brushing her temple before he suddenly felt the words slipping from his lips, knowing there would never be a moment more perfect than this one.

‘I love you, El’.

El’s eyes snapped open as she jerked backwards to stare up into his eyes that were so sure and direct, his expression so adoring, that she felt her breath hitch and catch in her throat.

Mike's eyes softened as he took in the shock and fear in hers and he pulled her in closer, kissing her forehead softly.

'You don't have to say it back. I can wait till you're ready, till you feel the same way'.

El's eyebrows puckered into a frown at his words, her shock fading as she blinked up at him in disbelief.

Was he serious? Did he really think she didn't feel the same way about him? How could he not know how much she loved him? She'd been so embarrassingly obvious about it!

She reached up and rested her hand on his neck, her fingers caressing softly as butterflies fluttered to life in her stomach. She kept her eyes on his, swallowing hard as she pressed a finger to his mouth, shivering as he pressed a soft kiss to the pad of her finger.

El narrowed her eyes at him slightly in playful warning before she took a deep breath and said the words that would change everything, but fell so short of what she felt for him. What he meant to her.

'You don't have to wait. I love you too, Mike. I always have.'

Mike's eyes widened as he gaped at her, shocking running through him, barely able to believe that the words he'd dreamed of had just slipped from her lips.

She loves him. El loves him.

Mike's lips suddenly stretched up into a grin so wide his cheeks ached but he didn't care, happiness rushing into him so fast he was silently surprised he didn't burst from it. El's felt her lips spread into a huge smile that matched his, giddiness bubbling up inside her chest as she let out a small laugh, feeling lighter than she had in years.

Mike loved her. She had finally had her soulmate, the boy she had always loved but never thought she could have. The boy who just happened to be the room-mate she had fallen in love with. And he loved her too. They were here and they were together. And El knew she would do whatever it took to make sure they were never apart again. And she knew, from the look Mike was giving her, so full of love and silent promise, that he felt the same way.

El stilled as Mike suddenly moved in closer, catching her chin gently in his hands, her heart fluttering in her chest. His eyes searched hers for a second, his own heart pounding, before he slowly leant in and

brushed his mouth against hers, swallowing her quiet gasp.

She let out a breathy sigh, eyes drifting shut as she reached up to grasp at his shoulders, pressing closer to him as she moved her lips against his, the kiss soft and tentative, but sweet. A quiet groan caught in Mike's throat as his own eyes slid shut, one hand reaching up to cup her cheek, caressing her cheekbone softly.

El shivered as Mike ran his hand down her back before it settled warmly in the curve of her spine and pulled her in closer. He didn't think they could ever be close enough and El clearly agreed as she wrapped her arms tightly around his neck, rising on her knees in front of him.

They pulled away after a few minutes and stared at each other for a second, breathing heavily, their eyes dazed and heated before they both smiled giddily.

'Wow!' El breathed, reaching up to brush his hair out of his face, her hands trembling slightly.

Mike grinned at her, running his fingers up her sides gently, before leaning down to press a kiss to her nose.

'Wow', he agreed.

He tugged her down beside him, wrapping an arm around her waist and pulling her in close. El lay her head down on his chest, her ears pressed above his racing heart and bit her lip to hold back the goofy smile that threatened to spread across her face, knowing that if she smiled she might never stop.

Mike looked down at her just as El glanced up and they both couldn't help but smile at each other. He felt his chest tighten at the bright joy in her eyes and tucked her curls behind her ear, tugging gently before letting go.

He suddenly stiffened as a nervous thought slipped into his mind. What if El thought he expected something from her now? That he expected her to do more than just sleep beside each other tonight?

He swallowed hard and rushed to reassure her.

‘El…I just want you to know that we can go slow. I…don’t expect anything from you…It’s not about that…I mean, about sex for me,’ he said, heat rushing to his cheeks as she stared up at him, raising one eyebrow in obvious amusement, ‘I just want to be with you. And if you’re not comfortable…’

El shook her head at him, determinedly holding back a laugh as his face flushed with mortified colour, his voice thick with embarrassment as he shifted awkwardly. She reached up and covered his mouth with her hand, cutting off the babbling flow of words and gave him a gentle half-smile.

She loved how sweet he was, how he was always looking out for her, and making sure she was safe and comfortable, no matter what. What did she ever do to deserve him?

'Slow. Slow is good', she told him, eyes soft, before she cuddled closer to him, her eyes soft and luminous and full of so much trust that he felt staggered by it. He didn’t know what he’d done to earn her trust but he knew he would do whatever it takes to make sure he deserved that trust.

Mike leant down and pressed a soft kiss to her lips, feeling them curve against his for a second before he pulled back, wrapping his arms around her as she slid an arm around his waist. They both closed their eyes and drifted off to sleep together, content in each other’s arms as both felt safe and whole in a way they never had before.

Everything was good. They were together.

**

Mike came to wake slowly, his eyes fluttering open as he glanced around. He frowned when he saw the other side of the bed was empty. He frowned, blinking blearily as he reached out and touched the rumpled sheets, the muscles that had tensed in confusion and panic relaxing again when he found them still warm.

El hasn't gone far, he thought, relieved, thrilled that last night was real, that it wasn't all a dream.

He heard the creak of the floorboards behind him and turned over to watch El as she paced back and forth in front of the bed, worrying her bottom lip between her teeth. She twisted her hands in front of her anxiously, eyes faraway and her hair sticking up in all directions as if she'd been running her hands through it.

Mike's eyebrows furrowed together slightly in confusion but he couldn't help but smile sleepily at her as he rose up on the bed and leant back against his pillows.

'Morning', he said, voice scratchy and deep with sleep.

El faltered and spun in mid-step towards him, eyes widening slightly in surprise. Her face softened as she looked at him all rumpled with sleep, his hair still up like a porcupine and lines from his pillow creasing his cheeks. But the worry didn't completely fade from her eyes, her face stiff with anxiety.

Mike frowned as she wrapped her arms around her middle, the sure sign that she was anxious or worried about something and sat up straighter. Something was clearly on her mind. He waited for her to speak for a few minutes in which she just looked at him silently, licking her lips before she began to fidget anxiously, raising a questioning eyebrow at her.

'Are you okay?'

El let out a huff, pushing her hair out of her face before she glanced around the room. She spotted his replica Millennium Falcon and walked over to pick it up before returning to Mike.

'I want to show you something', she said, her eyes huge and her face so pale he was a little worried she was going to collapse any second.

Mike studied her for a second, eyes darting between her face and the millennium falcon for a few seconds, his face scrunching in confusion before he nodded.

'Okay.'

El took a deep breath and placed the replica on the bed and focused her eyes on it, purposefully not looking at Mike, as she pulled her

powers up from the very core of her, feeling it stirring back to life and slowly beginning to fill every inch of her. She focused a small bit of it at the Millennium Falcon, her breath coming fast, nerves fluttering to life in her stomach, as it began to twitch on the mattress.

Holy shit!

Mike watched with wide eyes as the Millennium Falcon jerked on the bed before it slowly rose into the air, hovering there for a long moment. His eyes swung to El's as his mouth fell open, gawking at her in amazement as the replica zoomed across the room and then back as El flicked her hand, letting out a surprised laugh. The laugh quickly died as he saw the bright blood beginning to drip from her nose and onto her lip, panic rising inside him.

'El...' he began, wanting to ask her to stop, to not hurt herself, but El was already lowering the replica to the bed where it settled, lifeless once more.

Stunned realisation filled Mike, the final thing that had never made sense clicking into place. He scooted forwards to sit on the edge of the bed as she watched him silently, her head tilted as she squeezed her hands together to hide the way they were shaking, terrified of how he was going to react.

Mike silently took her stiff hand in his and pulled her towards him until her knees brushed his. His grabbed the bottom of his shirt and, ignoring her quiet protests as she realised what he was doing, wiped her nose gently with the edge of it, cleaning off the blood.

He looked up at her, his eyes soft and understanding, reaching up to cup her pale face in his hand, hating how scared she looked.

'That's the reason they took you, isn't it? Because they knew you had powers and wanted to use them.'

El nodded slowly, chewing the inside of her cheek as she waited for his reaction, her eyes wide with anxiety and fear.

Mike suddenly grinned at her, making her blink, excitement almost radiating from him.

‘That is so awesome. Can you do anything else? How long have you known you had powers?’

El stared at him for a second, before she almost slumped forward in relief, suddenly feeling foolish as her lips twitched up into an answering smile.

Why had she been worried? Of course Mike would think it was cool, she thought, as she felt the dread and nerves that had woken her earlier this morning fade completely.

She leant down and kissed him hard, cupping his face in both hands. Mike let out a surprised noise before he kissed her back, tugging her in to stand between his legs, his hands resting on the back of her thighs.

El pulled away after a few minutes, breathing hard, smiling at his dazed expression before she pressed her forehead to his.

'How are you even real, Mike Wheeler? Most people would have freaked out or run.'

Mike shrugged as if it was no big deal. As if she hadn't just showed him she could move things with her mind.

'I told you. I love you, El. All of you. This is just another part of you to love.'

El smiled softly at him, her brown eyes warming before she settled into his lap, leaning her head against his shoulder. Mike pressed a soft kiss to her neck before wrapping his arms around her waist.

How had she ever gotten this lucky? She knew she didn't deserve him, probably never would, but she knew she would hold on tight. She'd never let him go again. He was the best person she'd ever met.

She glanced up at him and reached up to tap his nose to draw his attention. Mike glanced down at her questioningly and she gave the half-smile he loved.

'Thank you'.

Mike's eyes squinted slightly in confusion as he looked down at her, not understanding.

'For what?'

El shrugged as she sat up straighter so they were face to face, slipping her fingers between his and squeezing hard.

'For being you. For making me happy again. For bringing me back.'

Mike's frown faded as he leant down to press a kiss to her nose, dark eyes soft on hers.

'Thank you for coming back to me.'.

As they snuggled in together, their hearts beating against each other's and their hair tangling together as they leant forward for another soft kiss, El knew that everything was going to be alright from then on with him by her side.

She was home.

Notes for the Chapter:

> Ahhhh....they're finally together! What did you all think? This has been such a long time coming it's crazy. I can't wait to read all your amazing reviews xx- Katie

13. Chapter 13

Notes for the Chapter:

> Hey everyone!!! OMG, your responses and reviews for the last chapter were beyond amazing! Thank you so much, you have no idea how happy you all made me! I love you guys!! Okay, well, here's the next chapter. I can't believe how far along in the story we've already come....Ahh...I'm starting to freak out, I only have three chapters to write and I'm done. I don't want it to end. Okay, rant over, lol. Hope you like this chapter...but I'm sure you will ;)- Katie xx

Mike stood under the warm spray of the shower, eyes closed and wide smile creasing his cheeks as he thought of the date he had planned for later, one of the many El and him had gone on in the last two months.

It had been the happiest two months of both their lives. They were completely inseparable, constantly going on dates to the movies or out for dinners, but mostly just hanging out in the apartment, never far from each other's sides, both wanting to make up for lost time. Mike's room had become their room only days after their discovery, neither of them wanting to apart even only to sleep.

The first morning after they had discovered they were soulmates El had told Mike everything about her life, about being taken, about her mother, being kept prisoner in the Lab and about the Compound and her family. He had listened raptly, wanting to know everything about her and had been horrified about what had happened to her, as well as fascinated to learn that there were more people out there with abilities, like Lucas who could control fire.

Their happiness had been marred by one thing- the sudden disappearance of Lucas. El hadn't heard from him since the night of the club, he wasn't answering her calls or responding to her when she knocked on his door. When she finally, at loss for what else to do, broke in to check on him she found the apartment deserted, his furniture and clothes still there, but no sign of him. She was

constantly worrying about him, convinced he must have gotten in trouble looking for Max or went after her himself and could only pray he would come back soon or at least call her.

Dustin had been thrilled when they had told him, wrapping them both in a massive hug as he bounced around excitedly. Now he never stopped teasing them, and groaning about the amount of time he had accidentally walked in one them making out. Which they did. Often.

Mike had always been hesitant to touch El before, having felt like he was betraying his soul mate, but that hesitance was gone from that first night. He was always touching her now in the tiniest ways, but they always made her heart race, brushing her hair back from her face, holding her hand as they cuddle together on the couch, or wrapped around each other in bed. And El was the same.

They couldn't seem to keep their hands off each other, kissing heatedly and touching whenever they had the chance. But it hadn't gone further than that, even though they both wanted it to. They were both too worried about pressuring the other and didn't want to push them or know how to bring it up.

But El, who was going slowly crazy for their slow pace, had decided that something had to change.

She stood in front of the shower stall, listening to Mike humming behind the curtain with a wide smile before she took a deep breath and dropped her towel onto the floor.

Well…here goes nothing, she thought, biting her lip nervously, before reaching up to pull the plastic shower curtain back.

El couldn't help the grin that spread across her lip as Mike let out a loud squeal, pressing a hand to her mouth to try to hide it as his eyes met hers, wide and dark with shocked, before they dropped to stare at her very naked body.

Mike flushed bright red as he swung around to meet her eyes as she climbed into the shower with him, pulling the curtain back around the tub, watching as she shivered, goose-bumps rising on her very bare skin.

Mike's eyes widened as he took in her nakedness, eyes heating before he quickly averted them too late. He barely held back a groan at the flash of naked skin he'd seen, of long, graceful legs and arms, small but perfect breasts and the triangle of curls between her legs. She was more beautiful than he'd even imagined and it was taking all the willpower he had to not look again, to drink her in.

'Hey…I thought we were going slow', he said, voice croaking and cracking as he turned his eyes back to her face, keeping them determinedly on her face.

Yeah, too slow, El thought, but just smiled at him, shrugging. Her eyes roamed over him and she felt her breath suddenly quicken.

She swallowed hard, licking her suddenly dry lips as her eyes traced over his broad shoulders that were smattered with freckles like the ones on his face and down to his surprisingly lightly muscled chest to his flat stomach where a trail of hair led down to where his cock bobbed in front of him, hardening under her gaze.

El squirmed as a delicious warmth settled inside her lower stomach, her legs shifting as she felt a strange wetness between her legs where an insistent throbbing had begun.

'We are. That doesn't mean we can't do anything else', she said, breathless, as she lifted dark and hungry eyes to his.

She lifted herself onto her toes and pressed her lips to his before she bit lightly on his bottom lip, soothing the sting with her tongue. Mike groaned, squeezing his eyes shut for a second before he opened them again to look at her questioningly, unsure.

'Have you ever…?' he asked, surprised that the question had never come up between them.

El shook her head, biting her lip nervously, before she tilted her head, looking at him consideringly.

'Have you?'

Mike shook his head quickly, pushing his wet hair out of his eyes.

‘No, I was…’ Mike trailed off as blood rushed to his cheeks, too embarrassed to finish the sentence. Telling her he’d been waiting for her just sounded so lame and corny when said aloud.

El, however, understanding what he couldn’t put into words, beamed at him as her squirming insides softened. She rose to kiss him eagerly, wrapping her arms around his neck as she stepped under the warm spray and pressed her wet and slick body against his.

Mike moaned, burrowing one hand into her hair as he stepped forward, the other settling on her hip and squeezing lightly. His fingers got tangled in her mass of curls and they both laughed as El reached up to him unravel them.

She ran her hands over his broad shoulders as they were finally untangled and then down his back, fingers digging in hard as their kisses become more heated and frantic.

Mike pulled away from her mouth and pressed breathless, open-mouthed kisses down her jaw and across her neck, feeling his heart slam against his ribs as he sucked harder and left a purple bruise behind that made his heart jump.

El’s breath came fast as she skated her lips down his chest, nipping at his collarbone as she ran a teasing hand down his stomach. She grinned at him as she heard his breath suddenly go ragged, feeling powerful as she saw the way he bit his lip, gasping.

Mike cupped her breasts in his hands, squeezing gently as his rubbed his thumb along her dusky nipple. El shuddered and arched into his touch, her fingers clutching at his shoulders as he leant down and drew a nipple into his mouth, sucking gently before turning his attention the other. El let out a quiet cry, feeling something clench inside her, and reached up with one hand to grasp at his hair, trying desperately to anchor herself, feeling like she was going to float away any second.

‘God, you’re gorgeous’, he groaned as he pulled away, rising to catch her mouth again.

El scoffed quietly at his words but the sound was cut off by Mike’s

mouth covering hers, changing it into a gasp. He pulled her in close until her breasts were squished up against his chest, rubbing against him in a way that made them both moan.

Mike suddenly spun El around, pressing her wet back to his front. El arched back, shifting restlessly as she felt his cock brush the small of the back, and rested her head on his chest as she looked up at him questioningly.

Mike swallowed hard, his hands trembling as he ran one down her stomach and slipped it between her legs. El jumped slightly, chest rising and falling rapidly as he moved his fingers along her folds, the sensations rolling through her making her whimper, biting her lip hard.

He groaned as he found her already wet, sliding his lips along her ear and nipping gently before he pressed a soothing kiss to her neck.

'It's okay. Trust me?'

El lifted her eyes to meet his and nodded.

'Always,' she said as she slowly spread her legs a little wider, opening herself to him.

Mike just stared at her for a second, floored by how much she showed she trust him with that single act, being as inexperienced as him, and was suddenly all the more determined to make this good for her.

He slid his fingers along her folds, rising higher and higher until he paused as she jerked in his arms, a gasp falling from her lips as he brushed the small button at the apex of her thighs and knew he found what he was looking for. He grinned and began to rub it softly, putting more pressure as he went, moving his fingers in steady circles.

El's breath hitched before shuddering out as her eyes widened, something she'd never felt before coiling inside her. The delicious heat spread through her lower stomach and then downwards, the swollen throbbing between her legs growing even more intense as it

moved closer and closer to some flash point.

The pleasure became sharper and sharper until it burst and she exploded, her toes curling against the cold tiles. She let out a high-pitched squeal that would usually embarrass her but in that moment she didn't care, muscles deep inside her clenching and fluttering.

She slumped weakly against him as the sensation faded away, her eyes wide as she puffed for breath, before she turned and slammed her mouth against his, kissing him frantically.

Mike laughed against her lips, cupping her butt in his hands and pressed her hips against his, grinding gently as his cock brushed her folds. He pulled back after a few minutes with a grin, expression smug.

'You liked it then?

El laughed at him, eyes brightening as she pushed her hair back, drops of water dropping from them and clinging to her collarbone and cheeks.

'Obviously. Where'd you learn to do that?'

Mike laughed again, pressing a kiss to her damp curls.

'I've had a long time to think about what I wanted to do to you… and I happen to have a great imagination… And I may have read a bit about it.'

El tilted her head at him, lip twitching up into an amused smirk, eyes alit with unshed laughter.

'What books? I'd like to thank the author.'

Mike narrowed his eyes at her playfully, flicking her nose gently.

'Smart-ass.'

El let out a quiet laugh which faded off as she felt him poking her stomach and looked down, studying him curiously.

Mike blushed, looking away awkwardly as he tried to tilt his hips away from her to try and hide his erection, feeling suddenly horribly self-conscious.

El took his hand and tugged him back to face her, finding his shyness adorable, and kept her eyes on his as she gently wrapped ran her fingers along the length of him.

Mike's legs jerked when she curled her fingers around him, squeezing gently before beginning to stroke experimentally, fascinated by how silky soft and hard he was in her hand.

'Let me know if I'm doing it wrong, okay?' El said, her eyes raising to his as she watched his reaction, her movements jerky for a few minutes as she slid her hand up and down his length before it quickly smoothed out.

Mike tried to laugh but only a choking noise escaped his throat.

She was kidding, right? If she did it any better he'd die!

El moved her hand up and down him, her hold tightening slightly when he groaned, feeling oddly powerful as he threw his head, growing harder and thicker in her hand. Mike panted, squeezing his shut as a familiar heavy burning pressure began to build inside his stomach.

El watched him, biting her lip as she felt the same pulsing warmth she'd felt earlier turning to her insides at the look on his face, head thrown back and his mouth opening and closing silently. She leant up and pressed her mouth against his, swallowing his cry as his cock jerked in her hand when she pumped faster.

His hands spasmed, latching onto her hips and holding on tightly, so tight he was sure he was going to leave a bruise, as the pressure in his stomach intensified, building and building until it exploded. It crashed through him as he let out a short, muffled cry and came in a long spurt against her hand.

'Holy shit', he gasped, head spinning dizzily as he opened his eyes and stared at her, completely dazed.

El smiled almost smugly at him and rose up on her toes, pressing a soft kiss to his cheek, so gentle and sweet after what they'd just done he was stunned and just blinked at her. He slumped against the tiled wall, a goofy, crooked grin spreading across his face, feeling like everything inside him was thrumming, exhausted but energised at the same time.

The smiled quickly fell off his face, mortified heat rushing into his cheeks, as he saw El staring down at the sticky white substance coating her palm.

'Oh god…sorry, El. I should have warned you before…'

El studied her hand curiously for another few seconds before she put her hand under the cooling spray of water and washed it with soap. Her eyes drew together in confusion as she looked up at him, not understanding why he was so embarrassed.

'Why are you sorry? That was the point, wasn't it?'

Mike stared down at her for a long minute, the embarrassed heat draining from his cheeks before he grinned, leaning down to kiss her, lips moving against hers enthusiastically.

Most girls would've been completely grossed out. His girl was definitely one of a kind.

El kissed him back just as eagerly, wrapping her arms around his neck and pressing in close again. She gave a complaining whine when he pulled back, fingers digging into his arms as she tried to yank him back.

Mike smirked at her dazed expression, taking in her flushed cheeks and fast breath smugly. El narrowed her eyes at his smug expression and dug her fingers playfully into his ribs, tickling him until he jerked away and let out a high laugh.

'You're amazing, you know that?'

El grinned.

'I'm sure I've heard that somewhere before', she said, laughing when

he rolled his eyes and gave a put-upon sigh that she quickly interrupted with another kiss.

They kissed lazily, drugged by the sensations that filled them as they ran their hands over each other, learning everything about each other they didn't know, all the places that made them their gasp and groan, that made their breath hitch and eyes darken.

They both froze when the bathroom door suddenly slammed open with a loud squeak, exchanging wide-eyed glances as they heard Dustin wander in.

'Shit', Mike muttered, backing them into the corner of the shower, turning and shielding El with his body, ready to block her from view if necessary.

Their lips twitched as they looked at each other, and Mike quickly pressed his hands to El's mouth, smothering the giggles that erupted from her. He felt his own laughter bubbling in his chest as he watched her shake with laughter, and El quickly pressed her own hand to his mouth, shushing him quietly.

'Hey, sorry Mike. I left my blue shirt in here and I need it for class tomorrow and you were taking forever so…'

They both pressed their lips together hard when they saw Dustin's shadows freeze beyond the shower curtain, his head snapping down as he obviously spotted El's clothes scattered on the floor alongside Mike's.

'Oh my god… seriously guys! Can't you at least try to restrain yourselves while I'm in the apartment?'

They both burst out laughing at his horrified tone, unable to hold it back any longer, and collapsed against each other as they heard Dustin shudder and quickly snatch up his shirt, turning to walk out of the bathroom.

'Sorry, Dustin!' Mike called out, tears of mirth running his cheeks as he pressed his face to El's shoulder, leaning against her to stop from falling over. El buried her own face in Mike's slick chest, hiccupping

with giggles.

They burst into a fresh round of laughter as they heard Dustin grumbling under his breath as he closed the door behind him, leaving with a mumbled, ‘horny bastards’.

Their uncontrollable laughter slowly petered off and they climbed out of the shower, drying each other with fluffy towels, getting so distracted by each other’s bodies they just ended up kissing heatedly, insatiable, for another twenty minutes until the shivers wracking both their bodies forced them to dry off and get dressed.

El looked up at Mike as he was drying her curls, his tongue sticking out slightly as he squinted in concentration and felt her face soften lovingly. She reached up and touched his arm, making him stop and look down at her with a questioning smile.

‘You set on going out tonight?’

Mike’s eyebrows drew together thoughtfully, shaking his head.

'Not particularly. Why, what did you have in mind?'

They stayed in, ordering Chinese food and played video games, both of them dying to play the new Mortal Kombat that Mike had bought only a few days before. They battled against each other as they sat on the floor, El sitting between Mike's legs as they laughed and taunted each other, trying to distract the other with sudden kisses and caresses.

When the Chinese finally arrived, they brought some to Dustin as an apology for earlier, and he took it gratefully, but not before he pointed a finger at them warningly, eyes warm and full of humour.

'No more public spaces. I do not need that sort of trauma', he said, shuddering again.

They both bit back laughter as they nodded quickly, agreeing.

They lay on the ground after finishing their meal, both over-full and groaning slightly. Mike lay with his head in her lap as they looked at the blinking play screen, both relaxed and happy.

El glanced down at him after a few minutes, running her hands through his soft, floppy hair.

'Do you ever wonder...what our lives would've been like if I hadn't been taken? If we had met earlier, when we were kids?'

Mike opened his eyes and looked up at her, face softening as his eyes saddened slightly.

'All the time.'

El nodded, eyes faraway, her expression suddenly thoughtful.

'Me too. You know...I tried everything you told me about when we were kids.'

His eyes widened, stunned, rising to sit beside her.

'You did?'

El nodded, pursing her lips slightly.

'I played Dungeons and Dragons, watched every Star Wars so many times I have it memorised, I read all the comic books you mentioned, tried chocolate-mint ice-cream and Eggs with syrup which, I'm sorry, is so gross', she said, laughing at his offended look, 'but I always wished we could've done it all together.'

Mike nodded, lips turning down as he wrapped an arm around her shoulder, pulling her in close. They sat there silently for a minute, both lost in their own thoughts, before El lifted her head off his shoulder, glancing at him curiously.

'What do you think it would've been like? I used to try and imagine it all the time when I was living with Hopper and Joyce... meeting you, I mean, and I was always too scared to be think beyond that...'

'We'd probably already be married', Mike said, pressing his lips together hard, his cheeks flooding with colour as he realised what he'd just blurted out,

El's eyes widened slightly in surprise and she smiled at him, leaning

back as he sat up, tilting her head.

'You think so?'

Mike nodded, breathing in an internal sigh of relief as he saw he hadn't scared her, and took her hands in his as he squinted thoughtfully.

'If we had met as kids? Definitely. We would have gotten married the second we finished high school and moved away to college together. We'd be that awesome married couple who have their own apartment in college and have water gun fights in our living room, and build blanket forts where we'd sit all weekend watching movies together and ordering take-out or making pancakes at three in the morning.'

'Damn right we would be', El said, laughing as she turned her hand over so she could slip her fingers between his, loving the image he was painting. Of what could have been. And... what still could be. 'What else did you imagine for us?'

'Well...maybe we would move back to my hometown when we finished college...I mean if you wanted that...and we'd just be happy together. I might become a teacher and you'd do...whatever made you happy, and we'd have a house and a ....and a family. Kids we would love like crazy and a dog...' he said, trailing off, a little worried he'd freaked her out.

'Could we call the dog Eggos?' El asked, her face lighting up as she scrambled up onto her knees, a wide grin creasing her cheeks.

Mike laughed at her, shaking his head.

'Of course we could. So... none of that...that didn't freak you out?'

El crinkled her nose at him, leaning forward to punch Mike on the shoulder lightly.

'No, idiot. All of that...it sounds wonderful.'

'Yeah?' he asked, unable to hide his wide smile as he traced a finger down her cheek as his eyes searched hers.

El nodded.

'Yeah. I want that future with you, Mike', she said, leaning forward and kissing him gently.

Their kiss grew more heated after a few minutes, El's breath coming faster as she felt an urgency that was quickly becoming familiar rise inside her.

El rose to her feet, pulling Mike up with her before she grabbed a hunk of his shirt and yanked him towards her with a teasing grin, her eyes suddenly dark and hungry.

Mike's eyes widened, gaping at her as he felt the familiar burning stirring in his stomach at the look in her eyes.

'Again?'

'You complaining?' she said, voice amused.

'Hell no', Mike scoffed, rolling his eyes at her, 'I just don't want you to feel pressured...'

It was El's turn to roll her eyes.

'I'm the one pretty much jumping you right now. If anyone is being pressured it's you, Wheeler.'

'Well, in that case...' Mike said, shrugging before he abruptly pulled her into his arms and kissed her hard, grinning at her as he pulled back to pepper kisses all over her face.

El giggled as his lips pressed against the corner of her mouth, her lips curving up.

They flicked off the lights and backed into Mike's room, laughing, as his hands dipped under her pink sweater, his hands warm as they gently skimmed her skin. He tugged her sweater over her head, leaving her in her white lace bra and just stared, chest suddenly tight.

She was so beautiful, standing there in the dim light, that he still couldn't believe that she was his, and that she had chosen him. It still

seemed like some wild dream, one he was afraid he would wake from one of these days.

El gave him a gentle smile as she caught him staring, his thoughts slipping down the link accidentally, and cupped his cheek in her hand, making his eyes raise to hers.

'I still can't believe you're really here sometimes either. That you really love me.'

Mike shook his head, fighting back the sudden urge to cry, and cradled her head in his hands as he kissed her long and soft, their lips brushing over each other lovingly.

Their kisses quickly grew more frantic and El tugged at his shirt impatiently, yanking it over his head before she ran her hands over his shoulders and chest, leaving heated trails of sensation in her wake. She arched her back, moaning against Mike's lips as he cupped her bra-clad breasts in his hands and massaged them gently.

She moved her lips down, pressing warm open-mouthed kisses to his chest that made Mike groan quietly, before he stepped away with a ragged breath and gently pushed El back on their bed. She bounced twice on the mattress, giggling up at him as he smiled down at her crookedly before throwing himself down onto the bed beside her.

El let out a surprised squeal, laughing breathlessly at his antics before it was cut off as his mouth covered hers again. She kissed him back passionately, her fingers digging into the muscles of his back as she arched against him, wanting every inch of him covering her.

Mike sprawled over her, a knee settling between her thighs and his elbows on either side of her head as they kissed, his thumb brushing along her jaw and leaving a blaze of heat behind. El threw her head began a long sigh, burrowing her hand into his hair and tugging gently, biting her lip as it made him moan.

He lifted his head to glance down at her, his eyes darkening before he leant down and nipped her lip in playful retaliation, grinning when she gasped and squirmed restlessly beneath him. El tugged him back down to her and kissed him deeper, her tongue brushing his, and he

lowered down onto her fully.

Mike pulled away after a few minutes and began to kiss down her jaw and neck, sucking and leaving a trail of red marks as he went. El's head arched back as she reached down to cup his butt in her hands, squeezing and giggling as he jerked against her. He looked up, eyes narrowing slightly, as his pants grew suddenly way too tight.

'Is that how we're playing it then?' he asked, raising an eyebrow at her.

El shivered at his tone, her eyes wide as he slowly moved lower down the bed, his eyes on hers as he pressed kisses lower and lower down her quivering stomach. She stared, holding her breath as he began to unbutton her pants, glancing up at her, his smile wide as he pulled them down her long legs.

He pushed her legs open, and El felt herself blush, barely resisting the urge to cover herself with her hands, even with her underwear still on. It was the first time he'd been so close to her.... there...and she didn't know whether she was entirely comfortable with it.

Mike stared down at her, his eyes dark and hot, and she bit her lip, muscles deep inside her fluttering at the look on his face, feeling herself relax against the mattress, the embarrassment fading.

He pressed soft kisses down her thigh, moving closer and closer to the edge of her underwear, rubbing his finger along the lacy edge and grinned against her soft skin when he heard her breath hitch, shifting his hips against the mattress as he hardened even more at the sound.

El slapped a hand over her mouth to hold back her gasps, feeling like she was getting closer and closer to imploding with every press of his lips against her suddenly overheated and sensitive skin…

Crash!

They both jolted upwards, breathing hard as their wide eyes swung to the door, the crash sounding like it had come from the kitchen.

'If that's Dustin, I swear I'm going to kill him,' Mike muttered under his breath, reluctantly pulling away from El.

'You'll have to get in line', El said, glaring at the door even as she groaned, pushing her hair back, her insides still quivering as she sat upright.

They'd been so close to whatever Mike was about to do and she just knew it was going to be amazing. Damn it, Dustin! Could you have worse timing?

There was a quiet crackle from Mike's desk before Dustin's voice sounded from the Supercom, shaking with nerves.

'Did you guys hear that?'

Mike and El exchanged a nervous look, fear suddenly alive in their eyes, as they turned as one to look at the door as they heard another quieter bang. They both jumped to their feet, Mike throwing El his shirt which she quickly pulled over herself, covering her nakedness.

They both inched towards the door, Mike grabbing the baseball bat he kept for these exact situations from behind it. As he tugged the door open, Mike gestured for El to stay behind him, insisting on going first. El's throat tightened at the thought of him being alone and in danger and quickly grabbed his arm, shaking her head frantically at him, before she sidled up beside him so they would have to walk out side by side.

El lifted her other hand, holding it out in front of her as she stirred her power to life, ready to rise if she needed it, and glanced at Mike as he raised his bat into the air, both of them ready for a fight.

El reached over to flick the light switch and blinked as she was suddenly blinded by the bright lights above. She froze as her eyes adjusted, blinking for a whole new reason as all the air rushed from her lungs. She stared at the three-people standing in her living room, all with different expressions on their faces, as her knees grew weak and trembling.

Her hand reached frantically for Mike's, squeezing so hard he glanced down at her worriedly. He pulled her close as he looked between El and the three people in his apartment, two of them very familiar and the other a complete stranger.

El studied the three of them as she clung to Mike, breath coming in unnatural gasps. The dark-skinned boy who lounged against the wall, trying to appear relaxed and nonchalant. El, however, saw straight through the act to the tense muscles and the eyes he averted from her which were heavy with guilt. The boy she had the sudden to punch for what he'd put her through, not matter how hypocritical that made her.

Lucas.

The tall boy with the soft brown hair that fell to just above his shoulders and the eyes that had always reminded her of a lost puppy, so honest and kind, who was staring at her even as his lips curved into an ecstatic smile, expression stunned. The boy who had saved her from the snow all those years before and became her family.

Will.

El swallowed hard as she finally turned to meet the gaze of the girl with the bright red hair pulled back into a ponytail who stood defiantly in the middle of the room, her arms crossed over her chest. Her flame blue
eyes were cold as they met hers, face hard and blank. But El knew her well enough to see through the mask, to see the tears that she was blinking back and how her hands were clutching her elbows tight to keep them from shaking.

She felt her own chest tighten with unshed tears as she suddenly found it hard to breathe, clinging to Mike's arm even tighter, feeling like he was the only thing anchoring her in spot and keeping her from running from the room.

But she couldn't. It was time. Time for her to finally face the people she had left behind.

So, instead of running, she took a deep breath and spoke, the one word so quiet even she could barely hear it.

'Max,' she breathed.

Notes for the Chapter:

Ahhh cliffhanger lol Hope you enjoyed it and as always let me know! I live for these reviews- Katie xoxo

14. Chapter 14

Notes for the Chapter:

> Hey guys!!! Sorry for the last posting! I was being social for once (YAY! lol) and wasn't near a computer and then we had a family emergency and I spent most the night in the hospital so I had no time to write! But I finally get to post now!
> I really hope you like this chapter! It's definitely one of my favourites!! xx- Katie

El stared at them in disbelief, her mouth opening and closing every few seconds, her throat clicking uselessly instead of the words that seemed to catch there, unable to believe what she was truly seeing.

They're here, they are really here, she thought, her mind racing with so many questions she felt dizzy with them. How did they find her? What was going on? What were they doing here? Where had Max been all this time?

Mike glanced between El, the brown-haired boy and Max, his eyebrows drawing together in confusion.

‘Max? Where have you...What's going on...?' he began before his voice stuttered off, eyes popping wide as he remembered what El had told him about looking for Max with Lucas, and about the family she had left behind. The others with powers like hers.

He turned back to El, expression astonished.

'El, are they...'

El swallowed hard as she lifted her head to meet his eyes, nodding jerkily.

'It's...my family', she croaked out, clutching his arm even tighter as she turned back to drink in the sight of the three of them together, afraid if she looked away for longer than a second that they'd disappear, nothing but a mirage she'd made up in her mind.

She watched, speechless, as Lucas's eyes moved over her and Mike where they stood in the doorway, his down-turned lips curving up into a smirk as he took in Mike's bare chest and El wearing only Mike's shirt.

'What were you two doing?' he asked, cocking an eyebrow at them, his lips quirking in amusement.
'Nothing', Mike denied, too quickly to believable, blood rushing to his cheeks. He knew, from the doubtful looks Lucas and the red-headed girl sent him that it was obvious to everyone there what they'd been doing.

Lucas's words drew El from her stupor and she walked over to him slowly, tugging Mike with her, her hand clutching his tightly, needing him with her. She stood in front of Lucas for a second, eyes boring into him until he shifted nervously, before her face scrunched into a dark scowl and she punched him in the arm. Hard.

Lucas stumbled back at the blow, grabbing his arm as he hissed out a groan.

'Ow! What the hell was that for?'

'That's the least you deserve, Sinclair. Where the hell have you been? I've been worried sick. You could have at least left a note.'

El knew deep down that she was being hypocritical. She'd done the same thing almost a year and a half ago, but she couldn't calm down, the fear and worry she'd been feeling for two months building into an anger she couldn't control or calm.

Lucas sighed, running a hand over his face, though his expression was defiant.

'Hopper called me on a mission to go and get one of the Department of Energy jerks and bring him in. I didn't have time to call or do anything but grab a few sets of clothes and food and leave. I had to go immediately before we lost the trail and the asshole got away. Unless you would have rather me tell Joyce and him I couldn't go because I was working with you to find Max?'

El's glare softened a fraction before she glanced at the others and felt everything inside her tense again, nerves that had been calming flaring back to life.

‘If you are so good at keeping secrets how did Max and Will find out where I am?'

'Uh...Will's a mind reader,' Lucas said, his very tone saying ‘duh’.

El blinked at him, feeling the anger fade away as she realised what he wasn't saying aloud.

Lucas, who had always kept his mind closed and locked up tight ever since she'd known him after what they'd done to him in the labs, was keeping himself open to try to make it up to Will. He had kept her secret. He hadn't told them. They'd found out because he was trying to apologise to his soulmate. She couldn't stay mad at him for that.

She glanced at Will and almost sighed at the way he was holding himself, deliberately turned away from Lucas, avoiding looking at him, and felt her heart clench for them both. It was clear they were both in so much pain, so hurt and angry with each other. But despite it all, she could also see how much they wanted to be together, the glances that were missed by the other, the way they seemed to lean towards each other, needing their presence, but they were both too stubborn to make the first move.

Her face softened as she reached over, ignoring the way he jerked slightly and squeezed Lucas’s hand gently, feeling the tension and pain practically radiating from him. She quickly let go when she saw the wetness gleaming in his pain-shadowed eyes at the show of friendship and solidarity, knowing he wouldn't want to show weakness in front of everyone.

'Okay', she said, nodding minutely at him to show she understood what he wasn’t saying.

'It's my fault, El', Will said, stepping forward, expression guilty, 'I was so shocked to find out Lucas knew where you were I blurted it out and then there was no stopping...'

He trailed off as he glanced at Max's stony face before he shrugged helplessly.

El swallowed, feeling the lump that suddenly formed in her throat as she shook her head at Will, her lips trembling slightly.

'I'm not mad, not even close…Hey Will', she said, her voice wet and shaky.

Will walked up to her slowly, cautiously, and looked at her, before giving her the same grin he had given her the first day they met.

Hello El.

El let out a quiet sob as his voice filled her mind, tears springing to her eyes. Will quickly pulled her into a hug, wrapping his arms around her thin shoulders. El hugged him back tight, her breath coming in hiccupping gasps.

God, she'd missed him.

'Shush, it's okay,' Will said, rubbing her back, shushing her softly.

I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, she said over and over in her head, blocking out any other thought.

Will shook his head. 'Don't be. It's okay. I understand everything...'

Of course, he did, El thought, a wet laugh full of relief escaping her.

Will didn't know how to hate anyone or hold a grudge. He was just that kind of person, so kind and loving, he would do anything to protect his friends and would forgive anything. Too good for this world. She should have known he would never judge her, never blame her.

Missed you.

She sniffled as she pulled back, wiping at her eyes, slightly embarrassed as Will smiled at her.

'Me too', she said aloud, before turning back to Mike, who was

watching them with a small crooked smile.

Mike was silently thrilled for her, and he sent her the feelings down the link. He knew how much she'd missed her family over the past eighteen months, all the pain and guilt she'd been carrying, and was glad she finally had the chance to see them again. To let go of some of that pain he knew she was holding onto and to realise that they still loved her.

El shot him a brilliant smile as she felt his joy for her trickling down the link and grabbed his arm, pulling him over to stand in front of Will and her.

‘Will, this is…’

‘So…do I get an apology or a hug?’ Max asked abruptly, her voice stiff and harsh as she tilted her head at El, expression guarded as she unravelled her arms from around her and stood, every muscle tight, as if poised for a fight.

El stepped away from Will and Mike, her expression abruptly switching from joy to relief to one that was slowly bordering on anger as she turned to look at Max. Her eyes ran over her, up and down, as her shoulder slumped forward slightly.

She’s okay, she thought, letting out a shuddering breath as she felt something inside her that had been tight and aching since she’d found out Max was missing unravel and loosen. No bruises, no scratches, nothing. She was here, alive and safe.

But if she was fine, where the hell had she been? El wondered, her fingers clenching into fists as she stared at her. What had she been doing and why had she just run off without telling anyone first?

Oh, she was right, El thought, as fury replaced the staggering relief, roaring to life inside her, as she stomped forward to stand toe-to-toe with her. She was going to get a fight.

‘Are you serious? You want an apology? I am so mad at you you’re lucky I’m not kicking your ass right now.’

Max scoffed, raising an eyebrow at her as her lips thinned, eyes

narrowing dangerously.

‘Excuse me? You’re mad at me? I’m the only one who gets to be mad here.’

‘I have every right! Where have you been, huh? What were you bloody thinking going after Brenner by yourself? Are you crazy?’

Max clenched her jaw as her hands curled into fists, whirling around and beginning to stomp towards the front door.

‘I could ask you the same damn question. You know what? I am not doing this.’

El gritted her teeth, choking back a scream as her powers burst through her, the leash she usually kept on her temper snapping. She let it push out of her skin as she lifted her hand and jerked Max into the air, satisfaction filling her as Max let out a surprised yelp, kicking her legs and jerking her body as she tried to get back to her floor. But she knew it was useless as she felt an invisible band around her waist, holding her firmly immobilized and turned her head to glare down at El.

‘Damn it, El. Put me down right freaking now’.

‘No,’ El said stubbornly, glowering up at her.

Neither of them noticed Lucas and Will step back nervously as they heard El’s suddenly deathly quiet tone and saw the way Max’s eyes heated, both knowing all hell was about to break loose. They had been in the middle of an El and Max fight before and had the scars to prove it. It was not an experience they planned to repeat.

‘I told them turning up like this was a bad idea’, Lucas said out of the corner of his mouth to Mike who jumped, startled from his stunned gaping as he watched the scene, surprised and slightly proud of El’s show of power.

His girl kicked ass, he thought proudly, even as he turned his attention to Lucas, eyebrows raised in question.

Lucas shrugged.

‘When I turned up at El’s old apartment after I finally tracked her down she completely kicked my ass. And that was without her powers. I knew something like this would happen. Especially between these two’, he said, jerking a thumb at the furious girls who had begun to bicker loudly, flinching slightly and rubbing his arm, feeling an old scar twinge slightly in remembered fear.

Will kept his eyes on the girls, not showing a hint that he heard their conversation, though he was keenly aware of it, his heart jolting as he heard Lucas’s voice so close. Everything inside of him ached to just move closer, to take his hand or even just talk to him. Anything.

He stubbornly pushed the urge and accompanying pain aside and instead focused on his two friends, stepping forward to try and defuse the situations.

‘El…. Max…come on’, he began, his tone calm and almost placating.

They both swung towards him, faces dark and filled with furious colour as they glared at him and he instantly backed away, heart racing as he raised his hands in surrender.

El lifted her other hand and gently lifted the three boys into the air and floated them across the room, before turning her still narrowed eyes on Max, crossing her arms over chest.

As they landed softly, Mike, his heart skittering in his chest at the fact he had just technically flew- Holy, he just actually flew across the room’, he thought, excitement buzzing through his vein- immediately stepped forward, his lips turning down in concern as he headed towards El, hating the hurt and anger he could feel pulsing down the bond, hoping he could help calm her down.

A hand on his chest, however, halted him in spot. He stumbled backwards before turning to look at Will as he shook his head at him quickly, eyes wide.

‘I wouldn’t do that. Trust me, you really don’t want to get involved when these two start. It can get scary quick. It’s better to just stand back and let them have it out. I’m Will, by the way,’ Will said quickly, smiling as he held out his hand.

‘Uh…yeah, I know’, Mike said distractedly, watching El and Max battling it out worriedly before he shook his head and turned to Will and shook his hand, ‘Sorry I'm being rude. I’m Mike. I’ve heard a lot about you from El.’

‘I know’, Will said, echoing his words with a grin, ‘It’s good to meet you. I’m glad you finally found her. She’s needed and missed you for a long time’.

Will's eyes lowered to Mike’s wrist, an all-knowing expression on his face that made Mike frown in confusion. The frown cleared, his mouth falling open in surprise, when he felt the brush of mental fingers across his mind and realisation dawned.

Will Byers. The boy who could read and control minds.

‘Uh, I’m pretty sure she found me but thank you. We’re pretty happy…’ Mike said, feeling awkward as he squirmed slightly at the realisation.

Okay, how was he supposed to act normal about this? How did anyone act normal when he realised there were two more people standing in his apartment who had superpowers? he thought, mind going slightly fuzzy with disbelief and a quickly rising excitement.

They were like real superheroes or something, all with different powers and abilities like the X-men or the Fantastic Four. How awesome was this? Okay, be cool, Mike!

Will let out a quiet laugh as Mike’s thoughts drifted into his mind and slapped him on the back.

‘Yeah, it can be pretty awesome’, he agreed.

Mike flushed slightly as he realised Will had just heard every embarrassing thought he'd just had, before he shrugged it off and grinned back at him. His face went serious after a moment though and he turned to face him fully.

‘I just want to thank you…for saving her from them…from the snow’, he explained when Will frowned at him, not understanding, ‘if you hadn’t found her that night…’

Mike trailed off, unable to say the awful words aloud, shuddering at the mere thought of a world without El in it. Where she was just… gone.

‘You have no idea how grateful I am,’ he said, quietly.

Will nodded, eyes saddening slightly.

‘I do. And it’s okay. I’m just happy that you two found each other, that she’s finally happy. She...both of you...deserves all the happiness in the world after everything you went through to find each other.’

Mike nodded, throat suddenly tight and turned to look at El and Max who were hissing at each other so quietly they couldn’t hear what they were saying.

‘I know. And I’m going to do whatever it takes to make her happy.’

‘Good to hear. Or…you know…I’d have to give you the best friend talk about kicking your ass.’

They looked at each other for a long moment before bursting out laughing.

‘Consider me warned,’ Mike chuckled.

Lucas glanced at them curiously, and Mike just shrugged at him, showing it would take too long to explain. Lucas nodded at him before his eyes settled on Will, almost reluctantly, and his expression changed, crumpling as his eyes went dark with sadness and longing, his hand dropping to his wrist.

Mike's eyes followed his gesture, frowning as he saw the swirl of rainbow colour circling his wrist, his soul mark, before he slowly turned his head and looked down at Will's own wrist where it hung beside him. He bit his lip when he found the matching mark on Will's wrist, understanding filling him, as he saw the way Will deliberately turned his body away from Lucas, not meeting his eyes. They were soulmates. And they were obviously fighting.

He shot Lucas a sympathetic look. Lucas shrugged helplessly back at him, pressing his lips together before he walked over to lean against

the wall to wait for El and Max to sort their issues out, unable to handle being so openly ignored for any longer.

'...I don't care, Max. How could you do this? Everyone was terrified', El said, tugging on her hair in frustration.

Argh, this was ridiculous. They were getting no-where.

Max clenched her jaw, biting back a shout.

'You did the exact same thing! Why is it different when it's you who runs off with no explanation?' Max snapped back, glaring at her.

El's insides spasmed in pain as her words cut deep, knowing she was right. She felt her anger wavering and desperately grasped for it, holding on tight, because she knew as soon as it faded she would break down crying, and she didn't know if she'd be able to stop.

'I was so scared, Max. What if something had happened to you? You're my best friend and I thought you'd been hurt, or were captured or even worse.'

Max's usually stoic face suddenly crumpled at El's words, tears filling her eyes as her chin wobbled precariously.

'Well now you know how it feels. El, you just left and we had no idea where you were. You could have been dead and we wouldn't have known. You didn't even give us a way of contacting you. No address, no phone, nothing! You were just gone. Without a single explanation. You just abandoned us.... abandoned me. I was so scared. Do you know how much that hurt?'

El's hard face fell, tears spilling onto her cheeks as her anger deflated completely, leaving her shaky and exhausted, as guilt quickly filled her. She had never wanted to hurt Max, to hurt anyone of them. But she knew she had, and she didn't know how to fix it. She just knew she didn't want to fight anymore.

'I'm so sorry, Max. I hate that I hurt you. Any of you. I just...I know I shouldn't have run off like that but I... I had to leave.... on that last mission...' El stammered, trying to explain.

She closed her mouth, stopping the words when Max shook her head at her, holding a hand up, her expression softening a little though her jaw remained stiff.

'I know, Lucas explained everything to Will and me when we were driving over. You should have come to us, El. Just explained. We would've done anything to help you. No-one would have made you go on missions or even work with us anymore. You didn't have to run off and be alone.'

El bit the inside of her cheek, sniffling.

'I know...I just...I didn't know how to. This was just something I needed to do. I just...couldn't be there anymore. But I can't tell you how much I regret that I hurt you and everyone else. If I could change it...' El trailed off, unable to say to finish the sentence. If she hadn't left the way she had she may never have met Mike. She couldn't ever fully regret it, couldn't wish it away, so she instead changed her words, 'I'm so sorry, Max.'

Max stared at her for a few seconds before the hardness seem to melt off her face, all the anger draining away as she slumped in the air, trying desperately to blink the tears that threatened to fall.

'Damn it,' she said, tugging at the end of her pony-tail, a habit she had had as long as El had known her, 'I'm sorry too. I shouldn't have run off like that, and I know it. I just...it was my only chance to get close to Jackson, to finding him and getting him out of there. I had to make a decision so I did and I don't regret it.'

El shook her head, giving her a sad smile.

'I know and you shouldn't regret it. He's your brother. I would have made the same decision.'

Max swallowed hard, reaching up to brush away a tear that had escaped and was running down her pale cheek.

'Just...next time, if you have a break down, tell me okay? Don't just run off.'

El nodded her head quickly, silently promising and held up her

pinkie.

Max let out at startled watery laugh at the familiar action and gestured impatiently at the floor, eager to be back on the floor.

'Now put me down so I can hug my best friend.'

El slowly lowered her hand and Max drifted down to the floor, landing gently. She wasn't even fully on the floor before Max stepped forward and yanked El into her arms, hugging her bruisingly tight.

'Don't you ever do that to me again', she whispered in El's ear, squeezing her tight.

El shook her head against her shoulder, hugging her back just as hard.

'I won't, I swear. I've missed you.'

Max let out a quiet sob that she quickly bit back, wiping her eyes on El's shirt so the boys wouldn't see her being all mushy. God, they would never let her live it down if they saw.

'I missed you too. So much', she told her quietly, sniffling.

They both pulled back, wiping their noses on their sleeves and smiling at each other sheepishly as they took in their red-rimmed eyes and flushed cheeks.

Max looked behind El at her room-mate who was watching them anxiously from the room and smirked at him. When Mike just frowned, confused, she raised an eyebrow at him, glancing down pointedly at his naked chest and then El's bare legs.

Mike blushed before he grinned at her, shrugging almost sheepishly.

'So you and Mike, huh? When did that happen? Can't have been looking for me too hard', Max teased, winking at El.

El turned her head to look back at Mike and her face softened in a way that Max had never seen before. Almost...loving.

'Are you okay?' Mike mouthed at her and El nodded, grinning at him as he smiled back, relaxed and happy.

She turned back to Max, who watched the exchange with surprise, her eyebrows raised slightly, not entirely sure what she was seeing. But it was clear to her, even from that small interaction, that they clearly loved each other. And she was happy for her. If anyone deserved the chance at happiness, it was El.

'Mike's Him. My soulmate...' she explained when Max just frowned at her, confused, and let out a quiet laugh, 'the boy in my head. I finally found him, Max'.

Max's eyes almost bulged from her head as she looked from El to Mike and back again, her mouth gaping for a long moment before it stretched into a wide smile that creased her cheeks.

'No freaking way!'

El laughed fully at that, nodding her head.

'I swear it's true.'

'Oh my god,' Max squealed, yanking El into another hug, 'I'm so happy for you, El. Okay, okay, details. I need so many details, including.... you know...'

El giggled as Max wiggled her eyebrows at her.

'Okay, no, but seriously, you have to tell me the whole story. How did you two work out...'

Max's voice trailed off as her head suddenly snapped forward, staring at something behind El's shoulder. El turned around and saw Dustin had popped his head out of his bedroom, his hair wild and eyes wide with undeniable excitement as he took in the people crowded in his living room, darting from one to another as they whirled towards him, before they landed on El.

'Uh...is it safe to come out now?' he asked, tone a little nervous.

'Dustin', Max suddenly yelled, causing El to jump as she pushed past

her and ran to Dustin as he stepped out of the room, his lips stretching up into a smile. Max let out an excited cry as she boosted herself up and wrapped her legs around his waist before he was even out of the doorway, slamming her lips against his and kissing him frantically.

'Hey Red,' Dustin teased, as he pulled back, slightly breathless, and tugged at the end of her pony-tail, giving the biggest grin any of them had ever seen. Which was saying something for the perpetually happy Dustin.

Max punched his shoulder, narrowing her eyes playfully as she smiled at him, before jumping down from where she was all but wrapped around him and turned back to the others who were gaping at them. All except Will who was watching their reunion with a relaxed smile.

Of course he wouldn't be surprised, El thought, shaking her head dazedly. He probably knew this whole time.
El and Mike pulled faces at each other, beyond confused, their eyes wide.

'What the hell?' El gasped, her mouth hanging open.

'Oh, right. Well...yeah...anyways Max and I are soulmates.' Dustin said, shrugging as if it wasn't massive news, grinning at them as he slung an arm around Max's slight shoulders and tugged her close.

‘When did that happen?’ Mike asked, shaking his head, his stunned mind trying to comprehend the overload of information it had just received, ‘Why didn’t you tell me?’

Max shrugged, glancing at Dustin, her eyes squinting thoughtfully.

‘About a month after I moved in?’ she asked him and he nodded.

‘Yeah, that sounds right’.

‘How did you find out? Wait…Max is the girl you’ve been dating? You’ve known where she was all this time?’ El exclaimed, lifting her arms and dropping them in exasperation.

Dustin looked at her nervously, running a hand over his curls with a nervous half-smile.

‘Uh, yeah…’.

El narrowed her eyes at him, crossing her arms over her chest and huffing out a half-disbelieving, half ironic laugh.

‘Of course you did. Isn’t that just typical? Do you know much work we put in trying to find her and you knew where she was this whole time? Argh, I swear…maybe I should put you up in the air like Max as punishment’, she muttered under her breath.

Dustin perked up as he heard her words, bouncing on the balls of his feet eagerly.

‘Really? You’d do that? Oh my god, that would be so cool’.

El couldn’t help but laugh at him as Mike walked over and stood beside her, resting a hand on her shoulder that she leant into without a second thought.

‘Maybe some other time’, she told him, before she frowned, giving him a searching look, ‘So when I came here that first day you knew who I was?’

Dustin shrugged.

‘Max had already told me about her friend El who had gone missing. And then not long after she went undercover I found you outside the apartment and I…I just connected the dots.’

‘So you knew I had…that I had powers this whole time? But…you never said anything,’ El asked, eyes wide as shock and disbelief filled her.

Dustin had never showed any sign or even hinted that he’d known who she truly was and what she was capable of. He’d never treated her any differently, El thought, a lump forming in her throat.

Dustin face softened, realising what she was saying, and walked over to pull her into a tight hug, lifting her till her feet hovered over the

floor.

‘None of that mattered to me. You were…still are...just El tell me. Though it is freaking insane and totally awesome that you can move things with your mind!’

El laughed against his shoulder and hugged him back, sniffling slightly, feeling a rush of affection for her goofy, wild-haired friend. God, Dustin was amazing.

‘Wait a minute…. how did you guys figure out you’re soulmates? Your soul mark is on your butt!’ Mike suddenly asked Dustin, frowning at them in confusion and everyone turned to look at the two of them, eyebrows raised expectantly.

Dustin fidgeted under their stares and flushed bright red while Max just cocked her hip to the side, her arms over chest as she leant back against him, unconcerned as she waited for them to figure it out.

El coughed hard in shock as realisation hit her and she bit her lip hard to keep from laughing.

‘Um…so…Max had a habit of walking around naked when we all lived together…’ she told Mike, her lip twitching up as she spoke.

Mike frowned at her for a second, not understanding, before his face cleared and he turned to gape at Dustin.

‘And so does Dustin’, he choked out, eyes widening as he remembered their conversation the day he met El and burst out laughing.

‘Oh my god, you were both walking around naked…just imagine telling your kids how you realised you were soulmates’, Mike gasped out between uncontrollable laughter.

Dustin flushed even brighter, uncharacteristically embarrassed and pouted at Mike.

‘Dude…not cool.’

Max just shrugged at them, unfazed, and leaned over to kiss Dustin’s

red cheek.

‘Our kids won’t care. They’ll just know they have kick-ass parents’, Max told them as the couple high-fived, grinning at each other.

Lucas, who had been silent until that moment, suddenly stepped forward, expression annoyed.

‘Wait, so you both just told them everything about the Compound and the missions?’ he asked, scowling at them, ‘What part of secret organisation don’t you get?’

‘Hey, Mike already knew everything’, El protested, shooting him a cautious look, knowing all his frustration was about to reach breaking point.

‘Yeah, and I had to tell Dustin. It’s bad form to lie to your soulmate’, Max said, looking pointedly at Lucas, lifting her chin.

Lucas narrowed his eyes, taking a deliberate step towards Max as smoke flickered to life between his fingers as his temper rose.

‘Was that a dig? I feel like that was a dig.’

Max shrugged, flicking her hair over her shoulder, expression haughty.

‘Take it the way you want.’

Mike exchanged a wide-eyed glance with Dustin, both watching, stunned, as flames began to form in Lucas’s palm.

‘This is so cool’, Dustin mouthed at him and Mike nodded, grinning despite the tension. Damn right it was.

Lucas’s face darkened even more and he opened his mouth to retort.

‘Just quit it the two of you’, Will suddenly snapped, beyond frustrated as he glared at the two of them, throwing his hands in the air.

‘Max, I know you’re just trying to help but this none of your business.

It's between me and Lucas. Now both of you shut up or I swear to god I'll make you', he told them.

Lucas and Max gaped at him in disbelief as they realised what he meant- he'd use his powers to shut them up.

'You wouldn't', Max said.

Will crossed his arms over his chest as if to say 'try me', and they quickly closed their mouths, glowering at each other and muttering under their breath.

Mike chuckled and wrapped his arms around El's waist from behind, leaning down till his lips brushed her ear.

'I see what you meant by dysfunctional', he whispered, grinning, amused by their antics.

But it was clear, even to him who had only seen them altogether for less than an hour that they all loved each other, despite all the dysfunction and hurt feelings being shared around. They fought and bickered like siblings, maybe even more. There was a connection there, something stronger than any normal friendship, one born from shared nightmares and the kind of life and death experiences that bind, where you would fight for each other no matter what.

El giggled before elbowing him lightly in the ribs.

'Shush,' she whispered back, leaning her head back against his shoulder and glancing up at him with bright eyes, her lips pressed together to keep from laughing.

Mike's eyes softened as he watched her and leant down to kiss her nose, both unaware of the others watching them with wide-eyes. Max, Lucas and Will exchanged looks, all surprised by the depth of the bond that could sense between the two. It was clear that they were deeply in love but it went deeper than that. They were so in-sync, always knowing what the other needed without words and they hadn't stopped touching each other since they came out of what was clearly their shared bedroom, as if they were more comfortable touching than not.

It was a soul-bond stronger than they'd ever seen or known before. It was clear they were truly meant to be.

They both turned back to the group and blinked, startled to find everyone watching them. Mike cleared his throat awkwardly and everyone quickly shook their heads, turning away and pretending too late they hadn't been watching them.

'Anyways…where have you been? What have you been doing? You never told me', El said, turning towards Max.

'I've been working undercover as a maid for Brenner'.

El stared at her for a second, pressing a hand to her mouth as a loud giggle slipped out.

'Seriously? You, a maid? You're the messiest person I know!'

Lucas snorted out a laugh beside her.

'I know, right? That still gets me'.

'Okay, shut up,' Max said, glaring at them for a second before she rolled her eyes, shoving them both, 'Do you want know what I found or not?'

They all sat down around the kitchen table and Max began to explain.

She had been working undercover in Brenner's current hideout, a manor on the outside of the city, sending Will- who El sent an annoyed frown as she realised he'd been working with her and had known where Max was as well- any information she could get her hands on. Maids were pretty much invisible to the guards and to Brenner himself and it had worked to Max's advantage. She had gotten her hands-on maps, a layout of the manor Brenner was calling home and its weak spots, guard's schedules, Brenner's schedule, the locations of all the cameras and their blind spots, photos, blue prints and managed to hack his private computer system, giving her access to so much more.

'I figured out from deciphering the code in their private messaging

system and found out yesterday that they're moving Jackson in three days. That's why we're here. If they manage to move him, then that's it. We won't be able to track him again. I have no idea where they're taking him, they were careful not mention a location. We need to get him out now before anything else happens',
Will told them all, tapping his fingers anxiously against the table.

Max shook her head at him.

'No, we can't do this alone. We're going to need more than just the four of us, especially with El not fighting. We need Hopper and the rest of them as well.'

El's heart skipped a beat before beginning to race in her chest as she realised what Max was saying. They were going to home, to the Compound, to get Hopper and the others and to ask for their help. And they wanted her to go with them.

Her hands clenched into fists on her lap to hide the way they were beginning to shake as her breath started to come fast, her chest tightening painfully.

No… she couldn't do this…. she couldn't go home…

Mike felt his stomach clench, his heart beating wildly in his chest as fear and anxiety that wasn't his shot down the link and turned to El quickly. His throat tightened with panic as the saw how pale she suddenly was, her chest rising and falling rapidly, and the same anxiety and fear echoed in her dark eyes.

He moved closer, wrapping an arm around her waist and pulling her close, feeling her tremble against his side and squeezed his eyes shut, hating to see her like this again.

Just take a deep breath, okay? … he told her, pressing his lips to her temple and holding her tight. It'll help…
Will glanced over, blanching as he saw her, instantly reaching out with his mind.

El, it's okay. You don't have to come.

El took quick, gasping breaths, her hands grabbing Mike's and

holding on so tight she was sure she was hurting him. But he didn't let go, only squeezing back just as hard to ground her.

We both know I do. But I don't know if I can, she told Will, voice shaking.

'We should leave tonight,' Max said, jumping to her feet, eager for action, 'Get a head start.'

El's breath came even faster at her word, fingers spasming on Mike's.

Oh god, they were leaving now. She didn't even know if she could this…face them so soon after everything, after hurting them so bad. It was all happening too fast.

Lucas glanced at El worriedly, having seen the colour drain from her face as Will and Max had made their plans, and quickly shook his head at Max, his lips tightening as he looked straight head, trying not to draw attention to El's breakdown. He knew she'd be mortified later that everyone had seen her this vulnerable.

'It's too late now and it's a long drive. We should stay here tonight and then go first thing in the morning.'

Mike shot Lucas a grateful look, knowing El needed time to calm down and to decide. He held her hands in both of his, sending comforting and reassuring feelings down the link, trying desperately to help her calm down.

He knew she was seconds from bolting, from cracking and breaking completely, and his heart ached watching her. He just wanted to bundle her up and take her away somewhere safe, to protect her from all this. But he knew, could sense, that she wanted to see them, that she wanted it so much she ached with it. But she was afraid, the fear thrumming through her body and into his. Fear that they would reject her for leaving, the guilt of that action that had hurt them almost choking her.

Max opened her mouth to argue but jolted when Dustin kicked her under the table and jerked his head in El's direction, having noticed her reaction as well, his expression sad. He wanted to comfort her,

but knew only Mike would be able to calm her down right now.

Max's throat tightened as she glanced over at El and saw how pale she was, her hands white knuckled in Mike's, and closed her mouth. She nodded after a minute, chewing her lip nervously as she looked at El before quickly looking away, knowing she wouldn't want her seeing her this fragile.

'Okay, we'll head up tomorrow'.

They quickly organised where everyone was going to sleep for the night, everyone except El who was just staring down at the table, eyes dark and faraway. Max and Dustin disappeared into Dustin's room with a quiet goodnight, holding hands, while Will was given Max's room and Lucas El's old one. Will said goodnight to everyone but Lucas, who he had not spoken to directly all night, and went straight into Max's room, closing the door behind him and locking it with a loud click.

Lucas slumped as the door closed, running a hand over his face with a defeated sigh.

Mike hesitated before getting up and walking over to stand beside him.

'You okay?'

Lucas shrugged helplessly, staring down at the floor.

'Not really. But it's nothing I didn't bring on myself so….'

Mike patted him on the back and Lucas turned to look at him.

'Don't worry, I'm sure it'll work out. He'll come around'.

Lucas gave him a small smile, his lip twitching up slightly before he nodded, lip falling back down into sad frown as he walked dejectedly into El's room, shutting the door quietly.

Now alone Mike turned back to El who was still sitting at the table, her arms now wrapped around her knees as she stared at the wall unseeingly. He glanced at the clock on the wall and was stunned to

see it was already two in the morning. Definitely time for bed, he thought.

He silently walked over and took El's hand in his, tugging her up beside him. El blinked, looking up and gave him a shaky smile that they both knew didn't fool either of them. He pulled her into their room and into bed, pulling the covers over her shivering form as he tugged her into his arms and held her close. He ran a hand up and down her spine in soothing strokes, trying to relax the muscles that had tensed at the mere mention of her parents.

El burrowed in closer, her head on his chest and her fingers clutching his arms. Mike kissed her head, holding on tighter, silently sensing she needed it, the nerves she was feeling coming through the link and twisting his insides.

'It's going to be okay', he told her quietly.

El let out a shuddering breath, her racing calming as his fingers brushed the small of her back as her shirt rode up, his very touch easing her panic. Mike always knew what she needed even when she didn't. He was her touchstone, her anchor.

She lifted her head off his chest and looked up at him, her eyes huge in her pale face.

'What if they hate me?' she whispered, voicing the silent fear plaguing her.

Mike shook his head and moved in closer to press his lips against hers sweetly, wrapping an arm around her shoulders.

'Not possible. Everyone else forgave you. They love you, El. They could never hate you. No-one could.'

El sent him a doubtful look, scoffing.

'You're biased'.

Mike gave a low laugh, relief filling him as he saw she was slowly coming back from the panic, showing an emotion other than fear.

'Maybe...but I'm also right. They're going to understand. I promise'.

El was silent for a long moment, staring at the shafts of moonlight that were coming through his blinds, painting their bare skin pale white as it danced over them. She lifted their joined hands and twirled them through the life, this way and that, before speaking.

‘I hope so.’

Mike traced patterns on the bare skin of her arm for a little while before he lay back on the bed, pulling her down with him.

‘You need to get some sleep.’

El shook her head, lips pressing together.

‘I don’t think I can.’

'Try?' he asked, eyes beseeching.

El nodded reluctantly and sunk deeper into the bed, rolling onto her side.

Mike felt her shift restlessly for a while as he lay there with his eyes closed, exhaustion sitting heavily in his body after the turn their day had taken, but he didn’t fall asleep, not wanting to leave her alone. She had been alone with her fears for too long. He was going to make sure she was never was again.

And, if he was honest, he was a little nervous himself about what they were doing tomorrow. He was going to meet her family for the first time. If that wasn’t nerve-wracking, what was?

El sighed after a half an hour of tossing and turning, sitting up and pushing her hair out of her face. She looked down at Mike and watched as his chest rose and fell evenly, the sight almost hypnotic. She frowned, however, when she saw the way his eyelids still flickered, clearly still awake despite how he pretended, and realised it was because of her. He wouldn’t fall asleep without her. Wouldn’t abandon her to her thoughts and agonising.

Her face softened as she looked at him, barely resisting the urge to

brush his back, not wanting to disturb him, before she clenched her jaw. She lay back down again, settling her head against his chest, determined to go to sleep, even if it was just for him.

She listened to the even beating of his heart under her ear and was surprised to feel her eyes begin to grow heavy after a few minutes. She yawned loudly, shuffling in closer until her legs tangled with as the calming sound drew her away into sleep, despite how much her mind her fought against it.

'I love you...' she told him, voice drowsy as she drifted off, eyes fluttering shut.

Mike smiled without opening his eyes at her words and grazed her forehead with his lips, head pressing to hers.

'I love you too', he whispered back as he felt her settle more heavily against him, her breath warm against his neck as he let sleep finally drag him away.

Notes for the Chapter:

> So...what did you all think? I love hearing from you all! Seriously, your reviews keep me going :D xx-Katie
> P.S. As I am quickly running out of already written chapters the next posting may be another three days as well! Sorry!!! xx

15. Chapter 15

Notes for the Chapter:

> Hey everyone! Here it is...the next chapter! I actually didn't realise how long this chapter was until I started editing today! It's freaking massive, definitely bigger than the drunk El one. But anyways, I hope you enjoy! I'm so excited to hear back from everyone!- Katie.

El stared up at the house in front of her as she stood next to the open car door, her fingers digging into the material of her skirt at the thought of what she was about to do.

It had always amused her that the house looked nothing like its namesake. The name the Compound drew visions of a cold, metal bunker or prison, empty of all warmth and softness. However, the house El had spent the later years of her teens and had become part of a family in, was anything but that and seemed, instead, to radiate the very essence of warmth and family.

It was three stories' high and made of warm cheery wood that seemed to gleam brightly with large windows covered in flimsy white curtains that let in the late afternoon light. Potted plants sat along the sweep of the porch, filled with bright and colourful flowers in full bloom, and shoes of all shapes and sizes were scattered beside the front door. Cars were parked together at the side of the house, and both boys and girl's clothes fluttered in the wind on the clothes line.

It hasn't changed at all, El thought, the very sight of her old home filling her insides with warmth even as nerves tightened her throat and made her pulse race.
The only thing keeping her in that spot, stopping from jumping straight back into the car and driving away, was Mike beside her, his hand clutching hers tightly even as he wrapped his arms around her waist, squeezing gently.

'Don't leave me, okay? Please, not even for a second. I can't do this without you', El said, voice shaking as she turned her head to look up

into his face, lifting pleading eyes to his.

Mike nodded, tightening his arms around her.

'I'm not going anywhere', he promised, tracing soothing patterns on the sliver of skin bared by her high-waisted shirt and pressing a kiss to her cheekbone, his touch grounding her.

Will walked over to stand beside them, sending Mike a worried glance before he placed a light hand on El's shoulder.

'Are you okay? We can wait as long as you need before we go in…'

El shook her head at him, halting his words, as she took a deep breath.

'No, I'm okay. Let's go', she said, moving towards the house, wanting to get inside before s lost her nerve completely.

They all walked into the house, El and Mike following Will, Lucas, Max and Dustin through the front door and up the stairs to the second level where, Lucas told them, they spent most their time. Mike and Dustin looked around the house curiously, which was just as warm inside, with furniture that was threadbare that looked comfy, bright cushions covering it and bright jewel-coloured rugs on the floor. Every piece of furniture seemed to be covered in photos of the family, of one event or another.

Mike paused in the middle of the staircase, his lips twitching up into a grin as he studied one of the photos hanging on the wall. El and her three friends stood in front of the house in it, all dressed up for Halloween as Star Wars characters, looking adorable and young.

'Aw, weren't you cute?' he teased, eyes creasing, and gave a quiet laugh when El's cheeks went a light pink and she gave his shoulder a shove.

'Shut up, you', she said, even as her lips twitched up into a reluctant smile.

The joke, just as Mike hoped, settled the panic inside her even further and she rested her head against his arm as they quickly walked up

the stairs and caught up with the others halfway down the hallway.

They all paused in the doorway of the upstairs living room and peered in, checking to see who they would have to face first.
Max froze as she saw Steve and Jonathan, two more members of their team, lounging on the couch, Jonathan's head resting against Steve's shoulder who was running his hand through his hair, both of their eyes on the television as they watched a movie sleepily.

El peered past Lucas and Will's head, confused about why everyone had stopped in the doorway, and stared at the two familiar boys on the couch. Her hand spasmed on Mike's arm, her breath coming fast again as her eyes traced their features that she hadn't seen in so long, the fear that they would hate her rising again, stronger than ever.

Mike glanced down at El worriedly, craning his head to try and see what had upset. When he couldn't see past Dustin and Max's heads he shrugged, content to wait as he pulled El in closer, trying to comfort her.

Max let out a quiet squeak and scrambled back panickily and ducked half-behind Dustin, eyes wide as she muttered under her breath.

'Damn it, damn it, damn it,'

'What's the hold up?' Lucas asked, frowning as he glanced between Max and the two men on the couch. His eyes settled on Steve and his frown smoothed out, grinning widely in anticipation.

'Oh...yeah...right. Steve is totally going to kill you. He was beyond pissed when you just ran off without telling someone.'

'I know', Max hissed, glaring at him, 'Why do you think I'm hiding?'

'You can't just avoid him forever', Will said, matter-of-factly, tilting his head at her.

'Watch me!'

Lucas snorted at her.

'Coward', he said, his grin widening as her head snapped towards

him, eyes burning with rage, successfully distracted from her fear.

She stepped forward and pushed him so hard he stumbled back into the doorframe with a quiet thud. He gave a quiet grunt and stood up, eyes narrowing at her as he gave her a quick shove back.

‘I was mucking around, psycho!’

'Oh my god, seriously guys', Will muttered, rolling his eyes at Dustin. Would they ever freaking change?

Dustin gave a quiet laugh at the look on Will's face and quickly stepped in-between them, trying to break it up, reaching out to pull Max back.

He let out a loud 'ow', however, when Max accidentally stepped on his foot on the way, wincing as her full weight settled on him.

'Shit, sorry, babe', Max said loudly, stepping forward to make sure he was okay, studying his foot. Her head jerked up, slapping a hand to her mouth as she realised how noisy she was being and slowly turned her head to look at the couple of the couch, and almost squealed in fright when she saw Jonathan had spotted them, his brown eyes wide and shocked as they moved from Lucas to Max to Will and Dustin, unable to see El and Mike behind them.

Jonathan sat up straighter, his eyes never leaving them even as he elbowed Steve in the ribs, trying to get his attention. Steve jumped, turning startled eyes to Jonathan's face, blinking at his shocked expression before he followed his gaze.

He froze as he stared at the four of them, before his eyes settled on Max and they went from wide and surprised to dark and furious, expression darkening.

'Shit', Max muttered, wincing as he rose to his feet and crossed his arms over his chest, Jonathan rising to his feet behind him. She gave a weak wave, her lips lifting up into what she desperately hoped was a winning smile.

'Hey Steve, Jonathan', she said, tone nervous.

Steve stomped towards her, Jonathan trailing behind them, his face lighting up as he caught sight of Will and stepped forward to pull him into a tight hug.

'You are so lucky I'm not wringing your neck right now. Where the hell have you been? What the fuck where you thinking running off like that with no word for six bloody months! You scared the shit out of me, out of everyone. Don't you ever do that to me again, you hear me?' Steve growled at her, expression furious.

'Yes, Dad…' Max said, sarcastic, rolling her eyes at him as she mimicked his stance, crossing her arms over her own chest.

Steve gritted his teeth, eyes narrowing dangerously.

'So you're annoyed that I care now? Where were you? Do you think it was okay? To just run off for some fun with some random guy and to bring him home when you were done...' he snapped, gesturing at Dustin who just blinked at him, expression slightly insulted.

Max clenched her jaw, her fingers curling into fists as she stomped towards him.

'For your information I did not run away for fun. I was looking for Jackson! You know...my missing brother? And this is my soul mate, you gigantic arse!'

Dustin wrapped his arms around her waist, pulling her back. He tightened his arms around her, almost lifting her off her feet as she tried to jerk forward, ready to tackle Steve, not caring that deep-down she knew he was just being a dick because he was worried about her. He deserved to get his arse kicked.

'Calm down, Red', Dustin whispered to her, relaxing slightly when he felt her slump against him.

Steve blinked at Max, his mouth snapping closed in shock at what she'd just revealed.
In the sudden silence, seeing her opening, El threaded her fingers through Mike's and took a deep, shuddering breath. It was now or never, she thought as she pushed past the others and stood in front of

the two boys that were like her older brothers.

Steve's mouth, which had been opening to maybe apologise or to get an explanation from Max, froze as he caught sight of El, his words stuttering off in his throat as his eyes went huge in his head.

Jonathan took a stumbling step back from an almost smug looking Will, his breath hissing out and his face draining of all colour, leaving him white and shaky as he stared at her silently.

'El', Jonathan choked out, stepping forward once, lifting a hand until it hovered in front of him as if he was afraid to touch her in case she'd disappear.

El gave them a tremulous smile as they stared at her, their faces in varying degrees of disbelief, nerves rolling and pitching in her stomach. She felt Mike's thumb running back and forth along the back of her hand, reassuring as he sent calm and soothing feelings down the link until they settled inside her. Letting her know he was there and he wasn't going anywhere.

El relaxed slightly, flicking him a grateful look before she turned her attention back to Jonathan and Steve, aware of the others eyes on them.

'Hey guys,' she said, her voice shaking.

Jonathan stared at her for a long moment before he suddenly rushed forward. El barely had the chance to let go of Mike's hand before he was sweeping her up into a hug, cradling her gently in his arms. El sniffled as she breathed in the familiar scent of ink and photograph fluid that clung to him and felt his lips press against her head.

Tears filled her eyes as she hugged him back hard, wrapping her arms around his bony shoulders.

'Hi, sis', he whispered in her ear, voice wet and thick with tears, 'Welcome home.'

El let out a quiet sob and pulled back, giving him a bright smile even as her lips trembled.

He gently set her back on her feet, both laughing as they saw their eyes were both red with unshed tears, wiping at them, slightly red-cheeked.

El let out a surprised squeal as Steve scooped her up with an excited yell, spinning her around in dizzying circles.

'Hey, baby girl', he said cheerfully, lifting her and giving her a friendly smack of a kiss on the lips before plopping her back onto her feet. El gave a startled laugh and gave him a quick squeeze before stepping back, smiling widely, relief flooding her at their reactions.

It was okay. They didn't hate her. They forgave her. Just two more face and she'd know for sure.

Steve's face suddenly folded down into uncharacteristically serious lines, and he tilted his head at her, placing a gentle hand on her shoulder even as Jonathan stepped up beside him, the same worried look on his face.

'Are you okay?' Steve asked, eyebrows lowering.

'You can tell us, El. We just want to help, no matter what', Jonathan added, giving her a comforting smile.

El's smiled softened slightly at their concern and she glanced over her shoulder at Mike where he hovered behind them nervously, eyes darting around the room before he turned back to look at them and smiled back at El.

'I am now.'

'Good', Jonathan said, leaning forward and pressing a kiss to her cheek before he looked towards the boy El had been looking at and blinked, his head jerking back in surprise. He stared, stunned, a confused frown marring his features as he finally took him in fully, unable to believe what he was seeing.

'Uh...El?' he began and El glanced up from her quiet conversation with Steve, an expectant look on her face, 'care to explain why my brother-in-law is currently glaring at me?'

El's eyebrows drew together into a slight frown as she turned her head to look at Mike, seeing Steve doing the same out of the corner of her eyes and letting out a startled gasp.

Mike was indeed glaring at Jonathan, jealous of him kissing her even though he knew it was ridiculous, and felt his cheeks flood with heat as El's lip twitched up in amusement at his reaction, one hand on her hip as she shook her head in exasperated affection.

His jealousy quickly faded, the glare falling from his face and his expression morphing from warning to sheepish and on to confused in a matter of seconds as he recognised Jonathan Byers, his sister's soul-mate and husband. One of them anyways.

His head snapped from Jonathan to Steve Harrington, Nancy's other soul-mate and husband, who standing beside him, gaping at Mike in disbelief and shook his head slowly, feeling dazed and almost dizzy with confusion.

What the...what the hell was going on? he thought, mind muddled. What were they doing here?
El's eyes widened as Jonathan's words finally sunk in and she gawked at first Mike and then Jonathan, mouth opening and closing in bewilderment.

'Wait...what....are you saying that....is Mike your...' she stuttered, unable to wrap her mind around what they'd just told her, mind fuzzy and racing. What did this mean? They knew Mike all this time?

'Where is she?' a familiar feminine voice suddenly broke out into the surprised silence and El's breath caught, her throat tightening, her entire body beginning to shake as she spun around to the door on the opposite side of the room.

Every thought in her mind faded away as a tiny woman with messy brown hair and brown eyes which were in that moment wild and wide, burst into the room, gasping for breath. A huge, imposing man with broad shoulders and thick arms, his face harsh and weathered, but his lips soft and looking like they smiled often, followed close on her heels. His own blue eyes searched the room, widening when they landed on El, who stood halfway across the room, biting her lip

nervously.

He placed a gentle hand on the woman's shoulder as she spotted El as well, freezing in spot even her fingers twitched restlessly, as if she was holding back the urge to touch her.

El was vaguely aware of conversations going on around her, of her family reuniting and introductions being made but she didn't hear a word that was being said, her world suddenly a vacuum where the only three things that existed were her Joyce and Hopper, her adoptive parents, in front of her and Mike's presence hovering behind her, the heat of him against her back, comforting and soothing.

She didn't notice Jonathan and Steve exchanging a pointed look as El suddenly reached back and grasped Mike's hand frantically, holding on tight and pulling him in closer, both suddenly realising the answer to the question they had asked earlier, the enormous significance of that one tiny gesture, which was only confirmed by the nods of the others as they looked at them.

Mike and El were together. That was why he was there.

Mike didn't notice either, reaching out with his mind for hers, feeling the panic rushing into her at the sight of the two people he knew were her parents.

I'll be right here if you need me, he told her, running his mental fingers over the link in a gentle caress that sent a warmth through her stomach, his touch settling the nerves inside her, his calm settling deep inside her.

I know, she sent back, even her mental voice shaking, sending him a soft kiss through the link.

Joyce took a shaky step forward and another until she was standing in front of El, her soft brown eyes searching hers. She lifted a hand, letting it hover uncertainly in front of her for a second before she pressed her lips together and brushed El's hair off her face, tucking it behind her ear.

El's face crumpled at the gentle touch and she felt her eyes overflow,

tears spilling down her cheeks. Mike squeezed her hand quickly before letting go, whispering to her quietly.

'Go on.'

El threw herself into her Joyce's arms, burying her face in her chest and sobbing uncontrollably, her whole body shaking. Her breath hiccupped as she felt Joyce's arms fold around her, tugging her in close and shushing her quietly.

'Oh, El...' she said, pressing a soft kiss to her head, her eyes own filling with tears, 'it's okay, honey.'

'I'm sorry, Mom', she gasped out, opening eyes that felt swollen and gritty from tears, pulling back to wipe at her flushed cheeks, though the tears kept coming no matter how fast she dashed them away, 'I'm really so sorry.'

'Shush, it's okay, baby. Shush', Joyce told her, pulling her back into her arms, holding her tightly. She ran a hand down El's hair, soothing her, even as a sob of her own escaped her at the feeling of the slight body, that belonged to the girl who had become her daughter, in her arms again, safe and alive.

'I hurt you, I hurt you all...I didn't mean to. I'm so sorry,' El said again, her fingers clutching at the material of Joyce's shirt.

Joyce shook her head firmly, pulling back and looking down at the crying girl with a sudden stern expression that made El stand to attention even after all these years, her red-rimmed eyes meeting her Mom's.

'I don't want to hear you apologise again, El Hopper. There's nothing for you to apologise for or us to forgive. You hear me? No-one can understand what you were going through, though Will did tell us some of it when he called on the way over. You had to do whatever you needed to help you through it and I will always support any decision you make. I understand, sweetie.'

El's eyes filled with fresh tears as she nodded her head at her Mom's fierce look, her lips curving up into a small, trembling smile.

'I love you, Mom', she said, burrowing into her again, hugging her close.

Joyce shuddered against her with another sob, and hugged her back.

'I love you too, El. I've missed you so much, sweetie.'

They pulled back, Joyce wiping at El's cheeks with a wet chuckle before she turned to look at Hopper who was standing behind them, a soft look on his face, his straight lips twitching up into his version of a smile as he watched them.

El swallowed past the lump in her throat and stared down at the floor.

'I'm sorry I let you down', she said, voice small, her head ducking down slightly.

Hopper shook his head, tucking a finger under her chin and lifting her head up so her eyes met his.

'You didn't. You couldn't ever, El. I told you from the start it was your choice. Always. However you want to live your life, whatever makes you happy, will make me happy. No matter what,' he said, running a gentle hand over her hair.

El's gave him a trembling smile, sobbing quietly as she threw herself up into his arms, hugging him for the first time ever.

Hopper almost didn't catch her, stunned by the abrupt movement, but he quickly wrapped his arms around her, pulling her close and pressing a scratchy kiss to her head.

'I missed you, Elly', he told her, voice gruff and thick with emotion.

El smiled against his chest at the old nickname she hadn't heard in forever, nuzzling her face against his chest before she pulled back, wiping at her running nose with the back of her sleeve.

'I missed you too, Dad.'

Joyce smiled at the two of them before turning and jumping as she

caught sight of Mike standing there watching with a soft smile on his face, eyes soft and full of joy for El.

'Oh...hello...who are you?' Joyce said, smiling brightly and welcomingly, even as she wiped at her face self-consciously, holding out her other hand.

El watched the exchange, her insides warming as she walked back over to Mike who was shooting her a nervous look, not sure how he should introduce himself. She threaded her fingers through his and shoot him a warm, bright smile that he returned though his had a tinge of anxiousness that added a crookedness to it.

She was so happy she felt she could burst. She had Mike and her family back. How could she be this lucky? What had she done to deserve this?

Well…. here goes nothing, she told him, squeezing his hands as his fingers tightened on hers.

He swallowed nervously before nodding, eyes on hers.

Let's do it.

Joyce's eyes fell to their hands and then flicked up again, suddenly wide and knowing, taking in the way their eyes lingered on each other, the secret smiles and the silent communication. A surprise breath hissed from her mouth as understanding filled her and she reached for Hopper's hand, excitement rushing through her, even as Hopper looked between the two of them, eyebrows drawing together in confusion.

'Mom', El began, stepping forward with Mike, leaning against him as she felt his nerves run through her veins, running her fingers along his arm soothingly, 'this is...'

'Mike?'

Mike's head snapped around as he heard a familiar voice, and gaped as his sister, Nancy, ran in and froze in the middle of the room, her mouth hanging open as she stared at him in surprise and bewilderment, shocked by the very sight of him, unable to

understand what he was doing there.

She stepped forward, grabbing him by the shoulders, her eyebrows drawing together in confusion, a tiny line forming between them.

'What on earth are you doing here, Mike?' she asked, giving an exasperated sigh when he just blinked at her, just as stunned, and turned to look at Joyce and Hopper and her two husbands who just shrugged in answer, not knowing either.

She stilled as her eyes settled on El standing beside Mike, her eyes widening even more.

'Wait…El? Oh my god…you're home…okay, this is crazy, what the hell is going on?'

Mike shook his head, finally coming out of his shocked stupor and looked at his sister, eyebrows rising.

'Me? I could ask you the same damn thing. Seriously, you're part of this as well?'

Nancy blinked before she flushed, letting go of his shoulders and twisting her hands in front of her anxiously. She gave him a considering look, as if trying to work out a way she could get out of telling him, before her shoulders slumped as she saw the familiar stubborn look on his face. She sighed in defeat, reaching up to tug on her pony-tail agitatedly.

'Alright…how much do you know?'

'I know everything…except for how you're apparently involved in this.'

El's eyes darted between, wide and astonished, completely stunned by what she was hearing, the new information being thrown at her.

Mike was Nancy's brother? Nancy, who had been like her big sister since she'd moved into the Compound, who had taught her how to do her hair and make-up and who had helped Joyce give her the sex-talk was her soul mate's sister! All this time she'd had this link with Mike right in front of her and she had never known.

‘Wait… does Mom know you’re here?’ Nancy suddenly asked, her hands lowering to her hips as she squinted at Mike, her face quickly growing nervous.

Mike scoffed at her, expression disbelieving.

'Me? What about you? Does she know you're here?

El shifted uncomfortably in spot, trying to tug her hand out of Mike’s so she could give them some privacy, sure they didn’t want her eavesdropping. She let out a quiet yelp as she felt herself being pulled back, Mike’s hand unconsciously tightening on hers, needing her close.

She let out a sigh as she stood there awkwardly, tilting her head away as she strained hard not to listen in, more uncomfortable she could remember being in a long time.

She couldn't stop herself, however, from turning and gaping at them as they began to bicker loudly, with huge hand gestures and glares, stunned by the ferocity of it.

Steve laughed as he walked over to her, draping an arm around her shoulder and squeezing her gently. He felt something warm inside him when she didn't flinch away for the first time ever. Mike was obviously good for her if he'd helped her so much.

'Welcome to the Wheeler family, El. It's insane, but you might as well enjoy the ride.'

Jonathan came up on the other side over her and grinned at his wife and brother-in-law, shaking his head at their antics.

'You get used to it,' he said, shrugging and patting her head, as if to reassure her.

'So I guess business school was a lie', Mike said, crossing his arms over his chest and raising an eyebrow at her.

'Clearly,' Nancy said sharply, before she sighed, shoulders relaxing as she laughed shakily, running a hand over her face, 'Come on, Mike, it wasn't like I could tell Mom the truth. She would've freaked and

locked me in the basement for eternity'.

Mike nodded, lips pursed. She wasn't wrong. Karen Wheeler was not one to take her children being involved in life-threatening activities lightly or calmly. Or rationally.

His shocked indignation drained away, quickly being replaced with resignation as he shook his head.

'Yeah, you're right. Well...how long have you been working for them? What...what exactly do you do here?' he asked, eyebrows drawing together in confusion.

Nancy bit her lip, her expression suddenly nervous as her boys moved up to stand beside her and she leant back against Jonathan, lifting her eyes to Mike's.

'I... I kill monsters', she said, quickly speaking again as she saw Mike's eyes go wide, all the colour draining from his face, 'Uh...yeah....I kind of...Steve, Jonathan and I... we kill monsters from other dimensions. Remember Barb....how she disappeared?'

When Mike nodded, every movement jerky, she hurriedly told him everything about what happened to her old friend Barb. The police had determined that she had run away from home in high school but, in truth, she had been killed by a monster that had escaped from another dimension that had escaped Hawkins's Lab years ago, and how they had taken it down, catching it in a bear trap and burning it alive. Joyce had called Hopper when she had walked in and found them standing around the burning corpse and he had quickly offered them a job after seeing they had taken down a creature his most seasoned soldiers hadn't been able to stop.

Mike just stared at her for a long minute, gaping at her, half in horror at the idea that there were really monsters, like the ones kids were always scared were hiding under their bed or in their closet, out there and half in surprise that his sister was, apparently, a total bad-ass.

'Holy shit', he muttered, running a hand over his shocked face, 'This is freaking insane.'

'This is so freaking cool', Dustin said, in a loud whisper as he bounced beside Max across the room, 'this is like a real-life spy team.'

Max shook her head at him, laughing.

'God, you're such a dork,' she said, her expression almost mushy. Something none of them would have expected from Max of all people.

Lucas pretended to gag beside them causing Will to laugh despite himself, covering his mouth to hide his smile, annoyed with himself even as Lucas sent him a hopeful look.

Max turned towards them, narrowing her eyes at him.

'Have a problem, Lucas?'

He shook his head quickly, eyes going wide in panic.

Max may not have powers, but she was definitely the scariest of them all.

Nancy gaped at Dustin, blinking in shock at the realisation that he was there as well and seemed to know everything, her mind whirling.

‘Wait, Dustin is here too…. what the actual hell…’ she said, watching Max and him with wide eyes before she swung back to look at Mike, ready to demand an explanation.

Her eyes went wide before they rose to his face, a strange choking noise escaping her as she stared down at Mike’s hand, which was intertwined with El’s, her mouth falling open.

She gasped, her hand rising to her mouth, before her head snapped up to look at them, her breath suddenly coming fast.

'Oh my god, what...are you...is El....are you two...'

El grinned at her reaction, lifting her eyes to Mike's who grinned back, nodding his head, knowing what she was asking.

It was time.

They both turned so they were facing everyone, their friends who knew smirking as they realised what was happening, as the whole room seemed to hold its breath.

‘As I was saying before, everyone this is Mike’, she said, lifting their arms up so their wrists were pressed together, showing their matching soul marks sitting side by side.

Startled laughter slipped from Jonathan, almost a giggle, in the stunned silence that followed before the room erupted into chaos.

Nancy let out a loud squeal, jumping up and down before stepping forward and hugging them both tight.

'Oh my.... I can't believe this...this is insane. You.... and... Mike, you and El... all this time', she said, tears beginning to pool in her eyes, breath hiccupping as she reached up to wipe her eyes.

She pulled away from them, her face crumpling as she saw the bright smiles on their faces, the sort of smiles that spoke of true happiness and the kind that she never imagined she'd seen on either of them, especially Mike who hadn't smiled like that since he was a kid, and spun around, burying her face in Steve's chest, letting out a loud sob.

Steve sent Jonathan a terrified look which he chuckled at, walking over to pat her head gently as Steve rubbed her back in frantic circles.

'It's okay, Nance...'

'I know...I'm just so...happy for them.... I should’ve known...' she cried even harder, clutching his shirt, her tears staining it.

Jonathan shook his head, holding back his laugh that he knew would upset her and kissed her temple.

'I know, babe.'

Joyce burst into tears, pressing her hands to her face before she pushed past a stunned Hopper and pulled El into her arms, squeezing her so tight El was certain she heard her ribs crack. But she didn't mind and hugged her back just as hard, laughing as she began to

babble excitedly against her shoulder.

'Oh baby... I can't believe this, I feel like I'm in a dream...I never thought this would happen...Oh, I'm so happy for you...for both of you.... how did this happen? How did you...'

El shook her head at her Mom as she pulled away, smiling at her.

'It's a long story and I promise to tell you later but Mom, I'd like you to officially meet Mike Wheeler, my soul-mate.'

Mike stepped forward to stand beside El and smiled shyly at Joyce, holding out a trembling hand. Joyce looked down at it before smiling brightly, shaking her head slightly. He frowned, heat rushing to his cheeks, sure he had done something wrong when Joyce took his hand and yanked him into her arms, giving him a quick squeeze.

Mike jolted as he was jerked forward, surprised, but hugged her back with a quiet laugh.

Joyce's eyes were bright as she stepped back, pushing her brown hair back from her face.

'It's nice to finally meet you, Mike.'

'You too,' he said, warmly, his eyes skittering to El for a second as she walked over to her dad who was still blinking blankly, stunned by the news, before turning back to Joyce, 'I've heard a lot about you from El. She really missed you.'

Joyce gave a quiet sob, before she shook her head, chuckling at herself.

'Oh I must look like a mess', she said, fanning her flushed face, a little embarrassed before she lowered her hand and looked at him, eyes steadfast, 'I've heard a lot about you too. El used to talk to me about you all the time. I'm so glad you've both finally found each other. You were everything to her and I can tell by the way you haven't stopped looking at her or finding some way to touch and comfort her since I walked in that you feel the same way. That she's found that...you have no idea how happy that makes me.'

Mike smiled.

'I think I have an idea', he said, glancing at El, his eyes going soft and loving as he saw her being hugged and congratulated by her dad, her face glowing with happiness and laughing, not noticing the way Joyce beamed at him.

Oh, yes, he will definitely do, Joyce thought, gleefully.

'So he's the one, huh?' Hopper asked a few feet away, his shock draining away as El walked over to him, her lips quirking up in amusement at his reaction.

El shrugged, her smile spreading.

'Yeah, I guess. I mean, he's okay. I might as well keep him', she said, tone joking and mock-thoughtful, but it was ruined by the huge smile on her face.

She winked at Mike when he glanced over at her as he overheard their conversation, narrowing his eyes at her playfully in mock-hurt before he stuck his tongue out at her, making her laugh.
Hopper watched the exchange and felt his lips twitch up into his version of a smile.

'You're happy.'

El lifted her eyes to his face, eyes crinkling as she tried to make her face serious but she couldn't keep the smile off her face.

'Is it that obvious?'

Hopper nodded.

'You...light up around him. It's nice to see you this happy and smiling. It's about time', he said, wrapping an arm around her shoulder and kissing her head gently.

El grinned, leaning against him as they walked back over to Joyce and Mike.

Mike turned to face Hopper as he walked over to them, gulping

slightly as Joyce stepped back to give them privacy, dragging El away with her. He took a deep breath, straightening his shoulders before he held out his hand for him to shake, flushing when he saw the way it was shaking.

Mike struggled not to squirm under his gaze, holding his breath as Hopper stared down at him, his expression stern and blue eyes narrowed as they ran over. He felt strangely exposed, as if the man could read every thought or like he was under a microscope, being analysed and tested to see whether he was good enough for his daughter.

And Mike was right.

Jim Hopper studied Mike silently, his lips pursed as he stared at the boy who was the soulmate to his adopted daughter, the soul mate she had always missed and yearned for. The one who, when she sometimes stared into space and gone quiet for days when she lived with them and hid in her room, they had known she was thinking of and missing him so much it hurt.

But Hopper could tell, from the little interactions he'd seen since he'd walked into the room and first laid his eyes on this Mike, that he was worthy of his girl in a way he hadn't been sure anyone ever would be. Just seeing the way he treated her, always touching her gently, like she was made of spun-glass, delicate and special, and making sure she was safe and happy said him everything. And the way he looked at her…with so much love and a kind of disbelief, dazed and awed, like he couldn’t believe she truly existed, the same way she looked at him, told him she would always be safe and happy with him. He knew that Mike would never deliberately hurt her. No-one who loved someone that much ever could.

Hopper reached out and took Mike's hand, shaking it firmly, his blue eyes warming.

'You take care of her, Wheeler', he said, the 'or else' going unsaid but it was clear by the way that Mike's eyes widened that he heard it.

Mike nodded, expression serious and shook his hand back just as firmly, not needing the warning. He planned to do exactly that, for as

long as he lived.

'I intend to, sir'.

Hopper studied him for another second before he nodded, pleased with whatever he found in his face and clapped him on the back.

'Good to hear,' he said, smiling at him, barely holding back a laugh as when he turned back to his wife and daughter he heard Mike's audible sigh of relief.

'You finally let him in...' Joyce said, her eyes soft and wet, tilting her head at El who was watching Mike and Hopper nervously, biting her lip.

She startled as Joyce spoke, turning to look at her before laughing.

'He didn't really give me much of a choice', she said, shaking her head as she remembered the shock she had felt when Mike had broken through the block with another sheepish laugh.

'Good. You needed a push, my girl', she said, laughing when El scowled at her, offended, and kissed her head.

The others walked over then, having wanted to give them privacy, and all began to congratulate them loudly, hugging them as they all talked over each other. Max slung her arms around them, wiggling excitedly, while Lucas slapped Mike on the back and gave him a good-natured, 'Good luck, man. She's crazy', which he laughed at, grunting when El elbowed him in ribs playfully, making him pout at her and blame Lucas.
Jonathan and Steve kissed her on the cheek and mock-threatened Mike to never hurt her or else. Mike pushed them away lightly with a roll of his eyes, used to their antics.

Steve wandered over to Max during the chaos and draped an arm around her shoulder.

'Don't think you're getting out of anything that easy. We're still going to have a talk, missy', he said, tone even and almost casual as he watched the reunions and conversations going around.

Max scrunched her face up and groaned loudly but El, who had been watching out of the corner of her eye, could see she was secretly pleased that she had someone in her life who cared so much and had been worried about her. Steve and she had always been close and he was more of a parent to her than her own mother had been, the big brother she had always wanted.

They all gathered in the kitchen where an enormous dining table sat and crowded around it as Hopper and Jonathan darted around the kitchen and made a stack of sandwiches that everyone devoured ravenously, starved after the long drive and the emotional few hours.

El and Max did most of the talking for the next hour, El explaining about where she had ended up, how she had met Mike and how they had discovered they were soul mates and ended up together. Max quickly took over, outlining where she had been for the last six months, waving off their scolding with a roll of her eyes, telling them all the information she had gathered and why they had come home, needing their help to get Jackson out before they moved in two days.

'We can't do this on our own. Not with that many guards and obstacles. Early in the morning, around 5. 20 is the best beat, it's when they switch shifts and tapes for the security. There is a ten-minute window where we could get in. We just need more numbers', she said, her expression almost pleading.

Hopper laid a hand over hers on the table, and nodded, eyes soft on her face.

'Of course we'll help you, Max. You don't even have to ask, you know that. Now...who's in', he said, turning back to the others sitting at the table, 'raise your hands.'

'Well I'm definitely in. Let's go get him', Steve said, slapping his hands down on the table and Jonathan and Nancy quickly nodded, silently joining the team, while Lucas and Will raised their hands.

Hopper nodded, face proud, as he grabbed a sheet of paper off the table and began to sketch out a plan using the information Max had gathered, routes they could take and the best possible way to get in and out undetected.

'Okay...now we just have to organise teams. El... you'll be with...'

'No,' Lucas quickly interrupted, shaking his head as Hopper turned to look at him, eyebrows raised, questioningly, 'El's not coming. I promised her she wouldn't have to be involved in any fighting. She doesn't want to be part of any of that anymore.'

Hopper nodded immediately without a single word and leant down to slash her name off the mission list, no hint of judgement or recrimination, respecting her choice as he said he would. He knew what she had gone through last time and would never force her to go through that again.

El stared down at the paper, watching the pen begin to cross out her name, and found herself speaking before she'd even realised she'd made the decision.

'No, don't, I'll help...' she blurted out, her eyes widening as the words slipped from between her lips, barely able to believe what she had just said.

Everyone turned to stare at her, stunned by her decision. El was equally stunned, but....as she thought hard about it she realised it was really what she wanted. She wanted...no, she needed to help and to face it all, just one more time before she could truly move on. And she wanted to help Max, who had been there for her, no matter what since the start, to get her brother back.

She lifted her chin and looked at Hopper, eyes direct and sure.

'I want to help.'

Hopper searched her face before nodding, recognising the determination in her eyes, the same look she had had the first time he had given her the choice to join them and knew she wouldn't change her mind.

'Okay, as long as you're sure.'

Mike felt a spike of fear rush through at El's words, so sharp he immediately went white and he felt like he couldn't breathe, his chest tight and aching. His hands twitched in his lap as his mind went

utterly blank, the only thing he was aware of being the sudden terror he felt for her, for what she was about to do.

He knew she wouldn't go if he asked her, but he knew he couldn't, and never would. She needed this. He couldn't, wouldn't stop her, but...what if she got hurt? What if they captured her and took her away again? He would never survive that. Not again.

El felt her stomach clench, nausea rising in her throat, and her eyes widened at the fear she could almost taste on her tongue as it quickly filled her. Her head snapped to Mike and she felt her throat tighten, guilt flooding her veins, making her whole-body ache, as she saw the terror on Mike's face, realising what she was putting him through.

God, she didn't think sometimes! Of course Mike would freak. The last time she had gone on a mission she had blocked him completely for a whole year and a half and gone almost catatonic. How could she do this to him?

El opened her mouth to tell Hopper she couldn't go, but the words halted in her throat as Mike suddenly rose to his feet, his jaw clenched hard to keep his chin from wobbling.

'I want to come with you', he said, his eyes on El, who gave him a look full of guilt and worry, eyes darkening as her eyebrows drew together.

Mike flushed as everyone turned to stare at him, shocked by his abrupt outburst, but he kept his eyes on El, who waited patiently, her attention completely on him.

Mike swallowed nervously, but stiffened his jaw, determination rising in him.

'I want to come with you', he said again, his expression suddenly stubborn, 'I... I'll wait in the van if I have to.... or...anything like that...I won't get in the way or do anything to distract you from the mission but I want to come. I can't stay here and wait...I....' he trailed off, his eyes lowering to the table, unable to say what he really needed to in front of everyone. That he couldn't bear to separated from her, to be out of the loop and not know whether she was safe or

not for so long. It would drive him insane.

El's eyes softened, understanding what he wasn't saying and rose from her seat, stepping around the table and walking over to stand in front of him.

Of course Mike would find a compromise instead of asking her not to go, she thought, her insides softening with so much love for him she was surprised it didn't drown her, as she rose on her toes, wrapping a hand around the back of his neck and slammed her mouth against him, kissing him passionately, uncaring of their audience.

Mike stumbled back slightly, stunned by the abruptness of it, flushing as he felt everyone's eyes on them, but kissed her back just as hungrily, cupping her face in his hands and leaning down so she could lower back down to the floor.

El pulled back, brushing her lips against his one more time before she pressed her forehead against his.

'Idiot', she whispered, smiling up at him, 'Of course you're coming with me.'

Mike blinked, surprised, sure she was going to try and convince him to stay.

'I am?'

'We go together or not at all. We protect each other, right? That was the deal. How can you do that if you're here and I'm there?'

Mike felt the air rush from his lungs as he slumped in relief, relaxing as he pressed his lips to her forehead.

'Right, silly me.'

El grinned, nodding.

'Very silly.'

They jumped as someone suddenly wolf-whistled and swung around to find everyone watching them with wide grins.

'Aw,' Nancy said, grinning at them and laughing when Mike blushed, and turned to glare at her.

'Shut up,' he said, without heat, his cheeks feeling like they are on fire.

'Wow, dude', Dustin teased, winking at them and laughing as El's cheeks went bright pink.

'Okay,' Hopper said with a chuckle, seeing Joyce beaming at them, her hand clutching his under the table, squeezing excitedly, 'let's get back to planning. Okay, teams. Max, you will be with Nancy, Jonathan and Steve. El, that leaves you with Lucas and Will...'

'No', Will suddenly said, jumping to his feet and shaking his head firmly, crossing his arms over his chest, expression furious, 'I'm not working with Lucas. Not this time.'

Joyce glanced between the two of them, biting her lip as she saw Lucas's face drop and saw Will's chin wobbling even as he tried to be stern, eyes dark and narrowed.

Hopper sighed, running a hand over his face, frustrated, over dealing with all these teenage dramas before throwing his hands in the air.

'Okay, fine, we'll just rearrange someone to swap...'

'No, it's not fine,' Lucas snapped, slamming a hand down as he pushed back from the table and stood, glaring across at Will, 'this is getting beyond a joke. I have apologised and apologised and tried everything to make it up to you, when are you going to forgive me?'

'I wouldn't hold your breath', Will said, kicking back his chair and storming away from the table, calling back over his shoulder, 'change the damn teams, Hopper.'

'Don't change anything', Lucas said without a glance at Hopper and stomped after Will, catching the back of shirt and pulling him to a halt, holding on tight as Will tried to yank himself forward.

'No, you don't get to walk away again. Come on, Will, this is getting ridiculous. Just talk to me already.'

Will whirled on him, his face mottling with fury that barely covered the hurt that he was desperately trying to hide, his brown eyes dark and wet.

'I don't want to talk you, Lucas, don't you get that? What's there to talk about? You obviously don't want to be with me, so can we please drop it.'

Lucas stared at him as his hands fell limply to his sides, for once speechless, swallowing hard.

'What the hell are you talking about?' he choked, 'Why do you think I don't want to be with you?'

Will let out a strangled cry, beyond frustrated, as he reached up and pulled at his hair, tears filling his eyes.

'It's kind of fucking obvious, don't you think? What else am I supposed to think? Why else wouldn't you tell me about the soul mark?'

Lucas's face crumpled with pain and guilt, closing his eyes for a few seconds before he reached out to touch his shoulder.

Will stepped back, pushing his hand away with a defiant, angry look.

'Just leave me alone,' he said, voice flat and defeated as he turned to walk away.

Lucas's scrubbed a hand over his face, looking completely lost before he narrowed his eyes, jaw clenching determinedly. He stomped forward quickly and stepped in front of Will, blocking the doorway and his only exit.

Will groaned, throwing his head back and glaring at the ceiling.

'Lucas, for fucks sake....'

'You're wrong.'

Will raised an eyebrow at him, his expression sarcastic.

He opened his mouth, ready with some retort that was quickly cut off as Lucas leant forward and slammed his mouth against Will's hard.

Will yelped, his eyes opening wide in shock as Lucas's lips moved against his bruisingly hard for a few seconds, pouring all his frustration, longing and hurt into kiss, telling Will everything he had been unable to say aloud.

His face, which had been hard and angry, relaxed as he felt Will's lips move against his, softening the kiss as his hand burrowed into Will's hair.
Will moved in closer until his body was flush against Lucas's, his fingers digging into his shoulder's as his mouth meet his, kiss for kiss.

They pulled back after a few minutes and stared at each other, breathing hard, eyes wide with surprise.

Lucas's eyes softened and he pressed in closer to him until their noses brushed, curling his fingers around Will's neck.

'I want to be with you, Will. I always have. I've been in love with you since I was twelve years old, when I first came here and you gave me a drawing that you had made as a welcome present. But I never told you because I was afraid.... afraid of losing you as a friend, that you wouldn't like me like that. And then.... when I saw we had the same soul mark I was even more scared. I didn't want everything to change or our friendship to be ruined. You were the first friend I ever had. I... I didn't mean to hurt you. I was a moron'.

'You were', Will agreed, nodding, his lip twitching up into an amused smile. He laughed when Lucas narrowed his eyes at him, expression annoyed.

He moved in closer and pressed a kiss, gentler and sweeter than their first, to his mouth and smiled up at him.

'But I forgive you.'

They grinned at each other, slowly leaning in for another kiss, aware of nothing but each other.

They startled, jumping apart as Max let out a loud whoop, turning to

see everyone grinning at them, having forgotten they were in the room.

'Yes, go Will and Lucas', Max said, whistling at them as everyone laughed.

The younger kids burst into a round of applause, laughing at them as they both blushed, Will going bright red and Lucas's cheeks darkening, even as he scowled at them.

'Oh, quit it, the lot of you', he growled at them, though he was smiling widely, wrapping an arm around a still blushing Will.

Will glanced at his parent's, knowing they wouldn't care but still needing to be sure and leant against Lucas, relieved, when he saw them smiling happily, beyond thrilled that all their children had found their soulmates and were happy.

'About freaking time, you two', Jonathan said, ruffling Will's hair as he sat down beside him again, and high-fiving a smug looking Lucas.

When they all settled down, Hopper went through the plan in great detail, making sure everyone knew where they were supposed to be at all given times before shoving off from the table and wrapping an arm around Joyce's waist as he glanced at the clock.

'Okay, off to bed the lot of you, we'll be leaving around four so get plenty of sleep and be ready first thing.'

There was a round of half-hearted grumbled complaints and joking that they weren't ten and didn't need bed times which made Hopper roll his eyes, chuckling before they all made their way to their rooms, saying the goodbye one by one until the house slowly went quiet.

El took Mike's hand in hers silently with a small smile when they were the last two in the dining room and pulled him out of the room and up the staircase to the room she hadn't seen in eighteen months, which was situated at the very end of the hall on the third floor.

She opened the door and stepped inside, revealing the bright pink walls that were plastered with posters and polaroid photos, piles of perfume and scrunches and make-up covering her white dresser, her

closet still open with piles of clothes on hangers peeking out.

El stood in the middle of room staring, her throat suddenly thick and tight with unshed tears. Her lips trembled as she turned her eyes to Mike who was glancing around curiously.

'It's exactly the way I left it. They didn't change a single thing'.

Mike's turned to her, his face softening as he saw the tears glistening in her eyes and moved closer to press a hard kiss to her temple.

'Of course they didn't. They knew you were going to come back one day, even if you didn't. They knew you'd come home.'

El gave a quiet hiccup, wiping at her eyes before the tears could spill and gave him a wobbly smile, brushing his cheek with her hand, before she wandered over to look at her photos, laughter bubbling up inside her as she remembered some of the good times.

Mike followed her, studying her posters and let out a quiet laugh as he saw one hidden in her closet. He turned and grinning at her, expression teasing, and pulled open the door, wiggling his eyebrows at her.

‘Michael J Fox, huh?'

El's spun around her, blushing bright red as she saw the poster and pouted at him, beyond embarrassed.

'Oh, shut up', she said, grabbing a pillow of the bed and hitting him with it softly, giggling even though her cheeks were on fire.

Mike laughed, catching her hand in his and chucking the pillow onto the floor before he pulled her in close, burying his face in her hair.

El stilled when she felt his body shudder against hers, his breath suddenly fast and heavy and she ran a hand over his back, face falling.

'You okay?' she asked, voice soft and concerned, wrapping her arms around his waist and stepping in closer.

Mike shook his head, rubbing his cheek against her head.

'No...I... I'm really scared about you going tomorrow...terrified, actually,' he chuckled weakly, though El could hear the fear that made his voice shake under it.

She nodded, pressing her face to his chest, remembering the fear that had filtered along the bond earlier and nuzzled close, her lips brushing against his collarbone.

'I know and I'm sorry. I hate that I'm doing this to you, that I'm putting you through this. I'm being so selfish.'

He shook his head again, pulling back to look at her, his expression serious.

'No, you're not. I understand, El. I know this is something you need to do...you have to face this...'

El touched his face, her lips trembling.

'This is the last time, I swear to you. I'm never going again, I don't want to. And tomorrow...everything's going to be fine', she promised, her eyes on his, confident and sure, 'Nothing's going to happen me, not ever. I'm going to be fine. We'll all be together the whole time and we'll be finished within two hours, safe and sound, and then we can go home.'

'Home?' he asked, confused, his eyebrows drawing together as he glanced around the room. What did she mean home? Wasn't she already home?

'The apartment of course', she laughed, shaking her head at him. God, for a smart guy he could be pretty oblivious sometimes.

'That's home? But I thought...' he trailed, frowning as he gestured around her room, though El knew he was talking about the Compound as a whole.

El's eyes softened as she raised her hands to his shoulders and wrapped her arms around his neck.

'The Compound will always be home in a way. It was my first home ever and I will always love it but now...the apartment is our home. Wherever we are together is home.'

Mike smiled and settled his hands on her hips, nodding.

'Wherever we are...that sounds perfect.'

El nodded, smiling before she stepped back, biting her lip as she looked at him, her heart skipping a beat as she saw the way he was looking at her, like she was the sun and the moon combined, and suddenly she knew what she wanted, more than anything in the world. She knew it was the perfect moment.

Mike cocked his head at her as he saw hers suddenly light up and she ran her eyes over him, looking at him in a way that made pure warmth flow through his veins, as if he was the entire world, her world, and felt his heart stutter in his chest in anticipation. But of what...he wasn't sure.

'I... I don't want you to talk about it anymore. I don't want to worry. I just want to be here with you, right now. No tomorrow. Just now. Can we do that? she asked, her eyes suddenly dark and wide, lifting to meet his fully.

'Of course we can. I want that too.' Mike said, his fingers tracing the curve of her lips, of her smile, smiling himself as she turned her head to kiss his fingertips.

'I love you, Mike,' she said, her eyes on his, direct, something he didn’t recognise shifting behind her eyes.

El searched his face for a long moment, trying not to grin as she saw the bewildered confusion on his face that he often wore around her, and knew he didn't truly understand what she was saying, what she was asking.

Mike looked at her, his forehead puckering in confusion, before he shook his head, smiling and leant forward to kiss her nose.

'I love you too, weirdo.'

El shook her head, letting out a mock heavy sigh as she stepped back from him and pulled her shirt over her head, biting her lip as she smiled at him nervously.

Every thought in Mike's mind came to a complete halt, silence filling it, as he stared at her, eyes wide and mouth gaping. He swallowed, his throat dry as his heart began to race in his chest, his dick twitching to attention inside his jeans, hardening almost painfully.

His eyes widened even further as he finally understood what she had been hinting at, his stomach clenching as nerves came to life inside it and something else. Something hot and primal that heated his blood and made his fingers itch to touch her.

'Are you sure?' he asked her, needing her to be sure, not wanting her to regret a single second of their life together.

El nodded, shivering as he ran his knuckle along her cheek, giving him a trembling smile.

'I'm sure of you, Mike. Of us.'

Mike moved his hands to her cheeks, taking her face in both hands as his eyes searched hers, so soft and tender El felt her insides melt at the sight, before he leant down and pressed his lips to hers, kissing her slowly. Their lips quickly grew hungrier, kisses feverish and drugging, as they ran their hands over each other, leaving trails of heat and goose bumps behind.

El's eyes fluttered closed, every inch of her skin feeling like it was on fire, as she ran her lips down his neck, sucking gently on his pulse and feeling it jump beneath her mouth, feeling his hands, which were resting heavily on her hips, clench.

They began to tug at each other's clothes, pulling them up and off, laughing as they moved back together eagerly, hands roving over one another as new skin was bared.

'Hurry,' Mike muttered, tugging her shirt over her head as El giggled, unbuckling his belt with fumbling and eager hands. He took over sliding it through his jeans as El pushed her skirt down, taking her

underwear with it, until it puddled on the floor below her, stepping out of it.

Mike let out a startled moan as El palmed him through his jeans, pushing into her touch almost frantically. He tugged his pants down, kicking them away hurriedly as she reached inside his underwear, sliding her fingers along his cock, squeezing and running her thumb along his head. She bit her lip to hold back a grin as his leg jerked in reaction, groaning loudly.

Mike's head lolled forward, puffing against her shoulder before he pulled her into his arms, boosting her into his arms and squeezing her bottom as they grinded against each other needily.

Something hot and fluttery slid into El's stomach and settled there as Mike lowered her onto the bed, and crawled over her, eyes hot and hungry as they ran along her body.

He kissed her hard, tongue brushing hers, making her gasp, chest rising and falling frantically as she buried her hands in his hair, holding on tight. She ran her fingers over his shoulders and down his chest, arching up against him and squirming as she felt his cock rubbing against the curls between her thighs.

Mike pulled his mouth from hers and leant down, his hair tickling her skin as he pressed open-mouthed kisses to the hollow of her throat and down to her chest, circling each breast, grinning against her skin as her breath hitched.

His hand moved down her body, over her quivering stomach and lower until it slipped between her legs, groaning as his fingers moved between her folds and found her wet and ready. He slipped a finger inside her, first one than two, curving them and pumping gently.

El cried out as she felt his fingers enter her, covering her face with her hands as she wrapped her arms around the pillow under her head, mouth open, flushed and panting as a bolt of pleasure hit her. Her hips moved up and down with each pump of his fingers, thighs clamping around his hand.

She reached for his hands as the pressure built too high, too fast,

tugging desperately on his wrist as her chest tightened, almost unable to breath from the onslaught.

'Wait...too much.... not yet', she cried, squeezing her eyes shut, her fingers digging into his arm, unable to handle it, the pleasure almost too much.

Mike pulled back reluctantly, sliding his fingers from inside her, and slanted his mouth back over hers, stealing the little breath she had.

They rocked together, hands running over the curves and dips of each other's sweat-slickened skin, their lungs burning as they almost forgot to breathe, but didn't care, too lost in each other.

El pulled back, dragging in much needed air, before she slipped out from under him, moving lower down the bed, pressing a kiss to one nipple and the other, enjoying his sharp intake of breath, hips bucking impatiently as she moved lower and lower.

El sat on his lip, hitching her legs over his thighs and lowered down slowly. His cock grazed her folds as she settled onto him, pressing her hands to his stomach for balance as Mike curled his hands around her waist to steady her, squeezing, his touch gentle and yet still possessive.

Mike gaped up at her, his eyes dark and wide, licking his suddenly dry lips.

She looked like a goddess atop him, hair falling down her back, skin glowing in the muted darkness. He was unable to believe she was really his, that he was here with her right, now, doing...this. What had he done to deserve her? He was one lucky bastard.

El's eyes softened as she saw the shocked, adoring and almost reverent look on his face and brushed his hair back from his face. The smile, however, suddenly turned smug as she cocked her head to the side. He just blinked her for a moment, confused, until he felt her fingers running down his stomach and slipping between them.

A whimper escaped him as her fingers suddenly curved around his cock, pumping slowly, once then twice, until he was squirming under

her, before they tightened around him and she held him still in her hand just below her entrance.

Her thighs quivered as she hovered over the top of him, holding her breath as she looked into his eyes, her gaze direct and sure, dark with hunger and nerves and so much trust in him it made his throat burn.

'You ready?'

El looked at him, a smile curving her lips as she saw the nerves and anticipation in his dark eyes and leaned forward to press a long, soft kiss to his lips in answer.

'Ready', she whispered, pulling back, her eyes soft on his.

His blunt head bumping against her folds, brushing at her entrance and she jumped slightly at the feeling, laughing nervously. She lowered herself over him slowly, gasping as he filled her, biting her lip as he spread her wide, going deeper and deeper until she settled fully on him.

Mike pushed pain-stakingly slowly and smoothly upwards while she lowered until he was buried to the hilt. He panted for breath, holding still and letting her adjust, clenching his jaw to keep from mindlessly thrusting, fighting every instinct.

He groaned loudly at the sensation of her closing around him, surrounding him and pulling him in, so tight and wet, her muscles fluttering around him. His heart was racing was so fast he thought it would explode in his chest.

El winced, grimacing and tensing at the pinch of pain deep inside her that she hadn't expected, her breath hissing out. Her fingers clenched on his chest as she become aware of the full, burning feeling of her muscles being stretched by him, and bit her lip hard as she shifted, her muscles squeezing and fluttering at the new sensation.

'You okay?' Mike asked her, concerned, as she was still and quiet for a long moment, eyes squeezed shut, her breath coming in breathy gasps that had her flushed chest heaving.

The sight made him harden even more if that was possible, despite

himself, his hands tightening on her hips.

El swallowed hard and nodded, opening her eyes to meet his as the pain slowly receded, replaced by the strange fullness. Mike caressed her side gently as she slowly got used to the sensation.

El shifted slightly and gasped as pleasure sparked through her sharply as he moved inside her. She leaned down and kissed him feverishly, gasping as he shifted inside her again, her body clenching around him.

Mike groaned as her muscles squeezed him, kissing her back jerkily as his dick twitched inside her wildly.

She began to rock back and forth slowly, hesitantly, her movements jerky and unsure, slowly smoothing out as she moved her hips in tiny circular motions. Mike's hips bucked helplessly under her as she tightened around him as she moved, the burning in his stomach growing hotter and more furious, as all the air seemed to rush from his body.

Mike leant up and kissed her hard, nipping her lip with his teeth and soothing the slight sting with his tongue. El's breath hitched in her throat, her rhythm faltering at the dark and hungry look on his face as he reached up and cupped both her breasts in his hands, squeezing firmly. He twisted and pinched her nipples, gently, before rising up to suck her nipple into his mouth, his eyes rising to meet hers, watching her reaction.

El shuddered at the drawing sensation, a needy noise escaping her as a bolt of pleasure shooting threw her when he thrust upwards at the same time, tossing her head back and forth.

Mike pulled back, smirking up at her, feeling ridiculously proud to be the one to make her feel like this, before he pulled her mouth back down to his as she rose and fell on top of him breathlessly, cheeks flushed, his hips snapping up to meet hers, panting.

The heavy pressure in his stomach began to build with every thrust of her hips, and he quickly pressed two fingers to the wet heat of her, rubbing her clit in firm circles, knowing he wouldn't be lasting much

longer.

El jolted, her eyes widening as her cries grew frantic and high-pitched, pushing into his touch as that insistent warmth in her lower belly and the throbbing between her legs returned, searing through her in an uncontrollable wave, un-ignorable.

'Mike,' she cried, rocking against his fingers frantically as it rolled through her, on the edge of the best feeling she'd ever had, 'Please don't stop.'

Mike's rubbed her even faster, throwing his head back against the pillow, mouth open as he watched her squirm above him.

El reached out blindly and clutched his hands, clinging for dear life, feeling like she was going to fly away if he didn't hold her there. She froze, her muscles clamping down on him as she suddenly came, pleasure thundering through her entire body, radiating from her core and outwards, her sight greying for a few seconds as she swayed above him.

She slumped weakly against him, her entire body shaking and trembling and completely satisfied. She melted against him, aftershocks twitching her sweaty body as she gasped for breath, her eyes wide.

Mike groaned, his hips stuttering against her before he stilled, letting her catch her breath. He rolled them over abruptly a few minutes later, slipping from her body in the process. El let out a surprised squeal as she lay back against the mattress, before he pushed back in, both of them moaning at the sensation.

He thrust into her slowly, biting his lip, trying desperately to keep his pace slow and gentle, not wanting to hurt her.

'Faster,' El gasped out, urging him on, her fingers digging into back and then lowering to grasp his bottom, squeezing hard as she wrapped her legs around his waist.

Mike groaned and quickly sped up, slamming into her, his thrusts frantic and desperate as the pressure built and built inside him, his

balls tightening and drawing up tight against his body. His whole body shook as pleasure sparked through his veins, spreading to almost bursting point as he thrust into her, sweat dripping down his forehead.

'El', he cried out, leaning to down to pepper her face with frantic kisses, as his hips began to stutter, losing his rhythm as the pressure inside him finally burst open. Every muscle in his body tensed and trembled as he came with a guttural cry, pleasure crashing through him and wringing him out, as he spilled inside her.

El caught his mouth with hers as he gasped over her, swallowing his cry and stroking her tongue with his as he came.

Every muscle in his body tensed, trembling over her before he collapsed on top of her, head spinning dizzily. They lay together, sweaty and gasping for breaths, their throats and lungs burning for her, screaming for oxygen as their hearts slammed against each other's chest frantically.

Mike shifted, pulling out of her as gently as he can, pressing his lips to her forehead as he did. El winced slightly at the still strange sensation but relaxed again as he settled back against her, loving the feeling of him atop of her, the weight of him familiar and comforting

After a few minutes Mike went to move off her reluctantly, sure he must be crushing her. He was surprised when El immediately tugged him back, her hands insistent until he lay back on top of her with a happy sigh, kissing her shoulder gently as she ran her hands up and down his back.

She ran her hand through his sweaty hair as his head lay on her naked chest, rising and falling with her gasping breaths, panting into her throat. Mike lifted his head, his shocked eyes meeting hers before they both burst into laughter, their bodies shaking with it, against each other.

'Holy shit!'

'Oh my god, that was...'

'I know right!'

Mike lifted up onto his elbow, and brushed her sweaty hair back from her flushed face and leaned forward to give her a long, sweet kiss, brushing his lips against hers.

'Tell me again why we waited so long to do that?' El asked, her eyes bright with happiness as she rose on her own elbow to face him, running a hand down his shoulder and along his arm.

Mike shook his head, laughing.

'I have no idea. But I have a feeling it's going to be hard to stop now. Pretty sure we won't be doing much else.'

El laughed, pushing her hair back from her face as she rolled onto her back.

'Oh my god, you're so right. That was freaking amazing. I don't know if I'll ever get enough if that's what it feels like. Why did no-one tell me?'

Mike was silent for a moment before he burst into laughter. El glanced up at him, startled, before her lip twitched up as she saw tears of mirth filling his dark eyes.

'What?' she asked, lip twitching up at the contagious laughter.

'I just...Dustin is truly going to hate us now. There is no way we're going to be able to keep that promise about public spaces. This could get awkward'.

El's eyes widened and she slapped a hand to her mouth, laughter bubbling up from inside her as she collapsed back on the bed.

'Oh no,' she gasped between laughter, wiping her eyes, 'you are so right. We may have to get our own apartment'.

As their laughter petered out into tiny giggles that shook their bodies, they settled down against each other, relaxed and happy as their legs tangled together. El caressed his thigh as her head rested on his chest, listening to his heart began to slow, sighing contentedly

El stilled a long while later, just as she was beginning to drift off to sleep, her eyes going wide as she felt something twitching against her hip and looked down, lip twitching up as she saw him slowly hardening again.

El lifted her head to look at him, raising an eyebrow at him, amused and rather flattered that he wanted her again so soon. She barely held back a laugh as she watched his face flush bright red, embarrassed, leaning on her elbow as she watched his no longer sleepy eyes dart around, mouth opening and closing as he searched for words.

'Uh...sorry...just ignore that...' he stuttered, rubbing at his neck awkwardly.

El took pity on him and slammed her mouth against his, halting his mortified words as she kissed him hungrily.

Mike's eyes widened but he cupped her head with his hand, moving his mouth against her eagerly.

El pulled back, breathing heavily, her lips curling up into an impish smile.

'Let's not ignore it'.

He looked at her surprised for a few second before his eyes grew dark with worry, reaching up to stroke her hair out of her face.

'Are you sure? You're not too sore?'.

El shifted slightly, taking stock of her body before she shook her head. She was aching slightly inside, a painful twinge that pulsed whenever she moved, but it was a good ache, reminding her of what they'd just done. It definitely wasn't going to stop her from doing it again.

'I'm definitely not too sore. I think this is addictive,' she said, giggling as she wiggled in closer, kissing and nipping at his chin.

'Tell me about it', Mike growled playfully, shifting them so he was half on top of her, cupping her breast in his hand as he ran his thumb

over her nipple, 'I don' know if I'll ever get enough of you.'

'Do you hear me complaining? We're in so much trouble, Wheeler'.

'We definitely are, Hopper,' Mike said, grinning as he pulled her arms over her head and held them there, wiggling his eyebrows at her, making her laugh as he rolled back onto her fully and kissed her hard.

El's laughter was quickly cut off, moaning as she wiggled under him, and soon there was nothing but gasps and moans, and there was definitely no speaking for a long time.

Notes for the Chapter:

> So...what did you think? Can't wait to get all your amazing reviews!!! xoxo- Katie

16. Chapter 16

Notes for the Chapter:

> Hey everyone!!! OMG, we're getting so close to the end. I think I'm going to cry!! :(I'm going to miss you all so much!! Okay...anyways, meltdown over...haha Here's the newest chapter! It's another long one so I hope you enjoy- Katie xoxo

El stared out at the manor only a few hundred feet away, her heart racing in her chest as anticipation and fear churned and twisted her insides, her fingers twitching on the flimsy curtain. She could barely hear the buzz of activity happening behind her, of the others arranging their weapons, strapping on the tracking devices that already sat heavily on her own wrist, and going over the plan one more time, unable to concentrate on anything in that moment.

Well, Brenner's really come up in the world, she thought almost bitterly as she stared at the huge building, made of regal white brick, all the many windows dark and devoid of life in the pre-dawn hours. The lawns were perfectly manicured with not a single blade of grass daring to be out of place, pretty white and red flowers surrounding the fountain in front of the building. She could just see the hint of a swimming pool behind the lush hedges that lined the building, boxing it in. It looked like any rich man's hideaway, where he went for vacations or would hold lavish parties.

The perfect front for a prison.

She felt Mike's hand come up to rest on her shoulder, and felt her entire body relax under his touch, feeling the nerves slip silently away as he ran his fingers along the curve of her neck, gentle and comforting.

She could feel the anxiety and fear he was so desperately trying to hide from her vibrating down the link, knowing that he was dreading what was about to happen as much as she was but trying to put on a brave face. They hadn't been apart for longer than a minute since they woke that morning, hating that they'll soon be separated, even if

only for a few hours.

'So what's our exit plan? For when you all come back, I mean.'

El jumped slightly as Dustin spoke, so lost in her thoughts she had forgotten they were there, and turned to look at the others as they stood around the tiny table in the centre.

'Exit plan?' Will asked, his tone confused, keeping his face deliberately blank.

El's eyebrows drew together, confusion filling her as well. They did have an exit plan, right?

Will turned to her, sensing her bewilderment, and winked at her, his lips twitching up with barely concealed amusement, silently telling her he was just messing around. El rolled her eyes at him, her lips curving up into a small smile that she quickly covered with her hand, hiding it from Dustin.

'Oh god, we're all going to die,' Dustin said, eyes comically wide as he sat beside Max in front of the monitoring screens, pulling at his wild curls panickily.

'Not us...I mean, we can fight them off. But you...it doesn't look good,' Lucas said, shaking his slowly and patting his shoulder in mock-sympathy. He grinned as Max spun around in her chair to glare at him, holding up a surrendering hand behind Dustin's back to show he was just mucking around.

'You two are made for each other, I swear. Both arses,' Max told them, holding narrowed eyes on them and stabbing a finger warningly in their direction before turning back to Dustin, leaning over to kiss his cheek, 'Don't listen to them, they're just messing with you. We have an exit plan.'

Max turned back to watch the monitors, tightening her pony-tail as her eyes scanned over the screens, following the movements of the five heavily armed men in uniforms she was tracking, having hacked their system only twenty minutes before, waiting for their shift to change, and for them to have their opening.

'No, seriously, I'm telling you I have a bad feeling about this,' Dustin said, jumping up to pace back and forth in the tiny space before peeking out the window to peer at the manor.

El shook her head at Dustin, trying to catch his eyes as she felt Mike's body lock up beside her, silently begging him to stop talking.

'Dustin, that's not helping anything', she said, sidling closer to Mike, his nerves filtering down the link, making her hands shake uncontrollably, the same as she could see his were, even though he clenched his hands to try and hide it.

Her lips trembled as she felt the fear he was stubbornly trying to hide from her getting stronger until she could feel her own throat tightening with it, and quickly took his hand, squeezing gently.

Deep breath, Mike. It's going to be okay, nothing bad is going to happen, she told him, her thumb running back and forth over the thin skin on the back of his hand, feeling his pulse jumping beneath her touch, unable to hide the frantic racing of his heart.

Mike looked down at her, taking a deep shuddering as he nodded jerkily, his fingers tightening on hers as he pulled her in close, the familiar feeling of her heat soaking into him and the shape of her pressed against his side calming him slightly.

You can do this, he told himself silently, taking a deep breath and another, trying to drag air into his lungs that didn't seem to want to work, his panic tightening them as the same bad feeling, the unshakeable feeling of dread, that Dustin had sat heavy and unmoving in his own stomach.

No... you have to do this. Get a grip, Wheeler. It'll only be an hour, two at the most and she'll be back. She's going to be fine.

He repeated it to himself over and over, silently trying to convince himself, and barely resisting the urge to bundle her up into his arms like he wanted to and run away from there as fast and far as he could to keep her safe. He bit down on his tongue hard to keep from begging her stay here, to stay with him, and to keep her from going into that building. But he knows he can't, that he can't ask that of

her. She needed to do this.

'Yeah, we heard you', Lucas snapped suddenly, throwing down the gun he was putting together in frustration as he rose to his feet, 'The first million times. Just shut up already.'

Dustin turned around slowly, his eyes narrowed as he glared at Lucas and stepped forward, shoving him back.

'No, I have a bad feeling.'

'Do you ever have good ones?' Lucas almost growled, stepping forward and pushing him back, before they both launched at each other, hitting and punching any body part they could reach.

'Freaking hell.... seriously guys? What is your problem?' Mike said, exasperated, grunting as a stray elbow hit him in the side.

He stepped forward quickly, pushing between them and holding them back by their shirts like they were two years' old, resisting the urge to pull his hair in frustration, even though, secretly, he was beyond grateful for the distraction.

'Calm down, the two of you', he said, letting go of their shirts and shoving them to opposite ends of the van, his narrowed eyes silently telling them to stay there.

They both puffed, glaring at each other down the van before they turned away, crossing their arms over their chests.

Max and Will exchanged amused glances, rolling their eyes at their boyfriend's antics before Max spun towards Lucas, tilting her head at him, a slight smirk curving her lips.

'Why are you so cranky, Lucas? What...didn't you get any last night?'

Will's head snapped up from where he was strapping a gun to his ankle, letting out a high-pitched gasping noise as he blushed bright red.

'Max seriously? Jesus!' he groaned, covering his face with his hands.

Lucas raised an eyebrow at her even as he lifted a hand and rested it on Will's downturned neck, rubbing gently in comforting circles.

'Okay, I don't know why you all think I'm some sort of sex-crazed maniac, but you're right, I didn't get laid. Or much sleep either because... from the sounds coming from the next room, someone was definitely getting something and they kept us up all night. We weren't exactly in the mood after listening to that, it was kind of distracting...' Lucas said, turning and looking pointedly at El and Mike, a smirk of his own twisting his lips.

El frowned for a second before her face went blank with shock, realisation hitting her.

Oh, god, no! she thought, her mouth falling open as a strange choking sound escaped her. She had completely forgotten that Will's room was next door to hers. Lucas and he must have heard them... OH GOD!

She let out a mortified groan, turning to hide her face in Mike's chest, feeling the heat rushing into her cheeks, so hot she was surprised it wasn't scalding Mike through his shirt.

'No, no, no', she muttered, squeezing her eyes shut, refusing to look at any of them.

Mike, having come to the same realisation, gaped at Lucas beside her, his face flushing hotly as they all turned to look at them, their faces in varying degrees of amusement. He squirmed on the spot, shifting his feet awkwardly and running a hand over his face, a startled laugh escaping him.

'Mike and El... but how did they...?' Dustin voice trailed off as his eyes suddenly widened, understanding filling him. His confused frown fell off his face as he stared at them, grinning widely at the way they were blushing and squirming.

'Well...anything you would like to tell us?'

'Augh', El groaned again, burying her face deeper into Mike's chest and squeezing her eyes shut even tighter, wishing she could

disappear or fall through the floor, anything to escape them and this horrifying moment, 'I hate you all!'

Mike coughed loudly, feeling the heat radiating from his face as he wrapped a comforting arm around El's waist.

'Not particularly', he said, answering Dustin's question without looking up from the top of El's head, avoiding their amused faces.

'Ooh...bow chica wow wow. Go Mike!', Dustin crowed, laughing so hard he almost toppled back into the side of the van.

'Let's get it on', Lucas sang, his voice going high-pitched as he wiggled his eyebrows at them, laughing as they went even redder.

'Good one,' Dustin laughed, holding out his hand which Lucas quickly high-fived, both of them almost cackling with laughter, their fight completely forgotten in their joint mission to humiliate their friends.

'Okay you two...cut it out', Max said, rising to her feet, sending them both a threatening look as she walked over to El and Mike that made them cower backwards slightly, their laughter dying in their throats.

She nodded, satisfied, before turning to face Mike and El, the latter who was just beginning to peek out from Mike's chest, her cheeks a flaming red.

'Ignore them, El. I'm really happy for you guys. It's about freaking time if you ask me, for both of you. And it's none of our business what you two were doing. Next time,' she said, turning to look at Lucas, head cocked to the side, 'plug your ears, Lucas. You are just jealous you're the only one in the house who didn't get any last night.'

Will gagged at her at Max as she winked at Dustin, her expression smug and he grinned back.

'Okay, that's something I don't need to be thinking about. Now can we please talk about something other than El's sex life?'.

'Augh...stop', El groaned again, ducking back into Mike as he chuckled weakly, running a hand over her hair.

Why did she ever miss them again? That was it, she was never turning around again. She was just going to live the rest of her life with her head in Mike's chest. How bad could that be? Anything to avoid looking at any of them ever again. Could this get any more mortifying?

She felt Mike's lips brush her ear, followed by his warm breath that made her shiver slightly.

'Ignore them, El. We didn't do anything wrong. Don't be embarrassed', he whispered, his hand resting heavily on the back of her neck, the weight of it comforting.

She glanced up at him, her cheeks still flushed and sighed heavily, shooting the Lucas and Dustin a dark look.

'We are so getting them back for this. I mean, major payback', she muttered, her voice just loud enough for him to hear.

Mike laughed, nodding eagerly.

'Oh, definitely. I'll brainstorm. I have heaps of dirt on Dustin,' he said, winking at her as she pulled back fully and smiled at him despite the embarrassment still brightening her cheeks.

'I bet you do,' she grinned, before taking a deep breath, lifting her chin as she turned and walked over to stand beside Max at the table, ignoring Lucas and Dustin as they smirked at her.

She didn't even look at them as she lifted a small tendril of her power up, flicking her hand in their direction and grinned as she heard their heads knock together with a loud thud.

'Ow, shit!' Dustin cried, rubbing his hand with a quiet wince.

'Jeez, El', Lucas whined, rubbing at his eyes to try and get rid of the dizziness that suddenly blurred his sight.

Will laughed loudly, pressing a hand to his mouth as Lucas turned and gave him a wounded look, pouting, and leant up to kiss him softly.

'That's what you get, idiot.'

'Uh...as riveting as this conversation is...I really need you all to get focused,' Hopper's voice suddenly came over the intercom, clearly uncomfortable, and El's eyes widened, biting her lip as fresh heat rose to her cheeks, her expression horrified as she realised Hopper had heard everything, the speaker on the whole time.

'Oh my god', she hissed, glaring at Lucas and Dustin, 'I'm going to kill you both when we get home.'

Dustin's eyes widened comically wide and he took a hurried step back, hands raised in surrender as he mouthed a terrified 'what did I do?' to an amused Max, while Lucas just shrugged at her, unfazed, eyes bright with amusement.

'Okay, Hop', Max said, nodding, her expression suddenly serious as she turned and scrutinised the screens closely.

'Five minutes guys, then we have our opening. The guards are just packing up to get ready for shift switch', she told them, her face going pale as she watched all of them putting their finishes touches and reached out for Dustin's hand, holding tightly.

Dustin, Mike and Max were all staying in the van to keep an eye on the screens and to talk them through the mission but it was killing them all to let their friends go out there, more than any other mission ever had. Max felt guilty that they were doing this for her, putting themselves in danger to get her brother back, but it was more than that. It was forefront and heavy in all their minds that the last time they were all
on a mission together, El broke down and left for eighteen months and they couldn't help but worry that something would go wrong. Mike, especially, was secretly terrified for El, afraid he was going to lose her again, that something bad would happen, never having had been in this situation before- unlike Dustin who had been dealing Max being undercover for months.

Max let go of Dustin's hand abruptly and marched forward, walking to them all as they stood in front of the doors, ready to leave. Lucas's head snapped up, looking at Max curiously before his eyes widened

in surprise as she wrapped her arms around him, squeezing tightly and almost knocking him over. He blinked for a second, stunned by the show of affection, something both of them were never known for, but he quickly hugged her back, closing his eyes.

Max looked up after a minute and waved an impatient hand at El and Will who were watching them with happy expressions. El and Will exchanged amused looks before they moved in and joined the hug, wrapping their arms around the others and each other and holding on tight.

'Be careful, okay?' Max said, her voice thick and wet with unshed tears, sniffling as she lifted her head to look at them, 'We're finally back together and if any one of you numskulls do anything to ruin that I'll kick your asses when you get back'.

They all laughed at the warning, pulling back and smiling at each other.

El pulled away from the group after a little while and walked over to Mike, her lips trembling as she looked up at him, reaching up and pushing his messy dark hair out of his eyes, as he gave her a wobbly smile, catching her hand in his and holding it to his heart.

'I'll be right back', she told him, her eyes searching his.

Mike nodded, his lip twitching up into smile, carefully hiding his nerves and keeping his face devoid of all fear, trying not to think of all the things that could go wrong. He didn't want her to be worried about
him, to be distracted by it or anything else, and kept his thoughts and feelings carefully hidden behind a small rickety wall in his mind, wanting...no, needing her to be calm and focused when she left.

'I'm counting on that', he said, leaning down and catching her mouth with his, brushing his lips against hers in a kiss he hoped said everything he couldn't in front of the others. How much he truly loved her, so much it overwhelmed him sometimes, the strong belief he had in her ability to do this, and, most importantly, he hoped it told her how much he needed her to come back to him.

El sighed against his mouth, feeling everything he was telling her, squeezing her eyes shut to hold back the tears that were suddenly burning at the back of her eyes, hoping that he could feel the same feelings coming from her.

She pulled away slightly, her lips still vibrating with the heat of his, and lifted wet eyes to his, placing a hand on his cheek. Mike cupped his hand overs, squeezing tightly for a long moment before he stepped back slowly, letting her hand slide from beneath his, though it made his chest tighten painfully to let her go.

El took a deep breath and turned back to the others, who had turned away to give them privacy and deliberately ignored the tears glistening in her eyes, as they opened the van door carefully and began to climb out.

She swung one leg out of the van, before turning back and looking at Mike for a long moment, drinking in the very sight of him, before she smiled and mouthed, 'Love you.'

Mike's lip twitched up into a small crooked smile, the one she had first fallen in love with, and nodded.

'I love you too,' he mouthed back before she ducked out of the van and closed the door behind with her with a quiet click, the van quiet as they all stood there staring at each other, listening to the fading crunch of the grass outside as their family moved away from them and into the night.

Mike let out a shuddering breath, pressing a hand to his burning eyes as his shoulders slumped forward, no longer having to hold it together, to put on a brave face. He stumbled across the van to a chair, his heart pounding and his entire body shaking as he collapsed into it and buried his face in his hands.

Okay...it's done. She's gone, and there's nothing you can do now. She'll be fine...nothing is going to happen to her. Only two hours and she'll be back, safe and sound, and you can take her home. You can do two hours. You just have to be patient.

He lifted his head, shaking his head, not entirely sure he was going to

survive the two hours without completely losing his mind, and looked at Dustin and Max who were watching him, expressions concerned. They clutched each other's hands, both silently glad they weren't in his position, knowing they would never have been able to do something this hard, that he was braver and more selfless than either of them.

'So... what do we do now?' he asked, his fake cheerful tone cracking at the end, his face crumpling slightly.

Dustin and Max exchanged a look before they both reached forward, Dustin wrapping an arm around Mike's shoulder and giving him a one-armed hug that Mike leant into, his chest shuddering with panicked breaths, while Max laid a hand on his knee, squeezing comfortingly.

'We wait', she said, even as she shifted and squirmed in her own chairs, agitated, nervous and impatient, knowing she was only hours from seeing Jackson, to speaking to him and finally getting him back.

We wait, Mike thought, scoffing silently under the panic spreading through his body. If only it was that easy.

**

El crept along the halls of the cavernous, maze-like building, blinking rapidly as she tried to help her eyes adjust to the darkness. She followed behind Lucas and Will, her eyes darting around, taking note of all the cameras that Max had shut down for the few minutes they needed to get in undetected, her mind focusing inward as she felt Mike's panic pulse down the link, even through the hastily made block she had discovered earlier that morning.

She knew Mike would've been embarrassed to know she'd found it, that he must have built it to try and hide his fear from her, to keep her from getting distracted by his thoughts and feelings, so she hadn't mentioned it, even though it made a warmth settle deep inside her stomach to know that he was always trying to protect her.

El reached deep, sending reassuring feelings down the bond and closed her eyes as she felt him slip into her mind, his presence so comforting and familiar, his mental fingers brushing along the link as he sent the same feelings back.

I'm fine...just focus, El... I'll be here waiting for you when you get back.

She stumbled on the stairs, her foot catching on the first, and hastily grabbed the banister to keep from falling as her heart skipped a beat in fright. She took a deep breath, running a shaking hand over her face, movements jerky as she silently cursed herself for being so unfocused in her worry for Mike.

She felt a hand settle on her elbow, pulling her up straighter, and blinked, turning to see Will watching her worriedly.

'You okay?' he whispered and El nodded quickly, her lips pulling up into a sheepish grimace. .

Come on, El, concentrate, she thought, shaking her head to bring her mind back into focus. You can afford to be distracted now. Just do your job and it'll be over and you can get out. Can get back to Mike like you want to.

El silently followed Will and Lucas up the stairs while the others moved away from them, across the foyer and deeper into the house with nods and quiet thumb ups, their signal for good luck. They nodded back as they turned the corner and stepped onto the second floor, the hallways just as dark and silent, empty of any guards or conscious residents. But that wouldn't last long. They had to move fast.

'Okay, guys,' Max said, her voice suddenly coming to life in the listening device in her ear, making her jump slightly, 'Jackson's room is the fourth door on the right. Brenner usually keeps it locked, but it's a standard lock, nothing you can't handle. If he's not there, he'll be in the training center...more like torture chamber...in the basement.'

El exchanged looks with Will and Lucas before they nodded, inching their way along the carpeted halls, following each other closely as they counted the doors. They reached the door Max had mentioned

and Lucas immediately dropped to his knees, pulling his pick out of his pocket and slipping it into the keyhole, twisting and turning it slowly and methodically, his ear pressed to the door as he listened intently.

He grinned with triumph a few minutes later when he heard a distinct click and the door slowly swung open. He rose silently to his feet, pressing a finger to his mouth to remind them to be silent, which made El and Will roll their eyes at each other. Lucas noticed, glaring at them and giving them a finger which made them both grin as they quickly followed into the room.

Will had just followed Lucas over the threshold when there was a loud, ominous beeping, the room erupted in bright red lights. Will only had long enough for his eyes to widen at Lucas, whose own face had gone stiff with fear before the door slammed shut behind them, the lock twisting and locking them inside.

El jumped back as the door almost smashed into her face, heart pounding as the hallway echoed with the resounding bang. She froze, every muscle stiffening as she ducked into the doorframe to hide, eyes glancing down the hall and then the other way, listening hard for any noises that would show they'd woken someone. But there was nothing but silence. No-one had heard them. They were still safe and undetected.

She let out a sigh of relief, slumping against the door for a second, taking a deep breath as she pressed a hand to her chest, trying to calm her racing heart before she knelt down, her mouth close to the key hole.

'What happened? Why did the door shut?' she whispered, trying not to alert anyone to their presence even now, and listened to the quiet shuffling as one of them knelt on the opposite side.

'There are sensors set up on the floor that set off a closing mechanism on the door. We can't get it open', Will told her quietly, his voice shaking with panic as she heard the familiar clicking of the pick.

'And El...', Lucas's voice came through the barrier of the door, 'Jackson's not in here either. It looks like no-one's been living in this

room for a while. Something doesn't feel right. We all need to get out of here and fast. There has to be a key somewhere...'

El jumped to her feet, nodding decisively.

'I'll go check. Be right back,' she told them as she walked quietly down the hall to the next door, her hand on the gun of her hip, ready to yank it out the second she needed it.

'No, El, don't...' Will's voice hissed out, fading as she turned the corner and found the door to the next room, quickly turning the handle and slipping inside, closing the door behind her without a sound.

She stared around blankly in the darkness that seemed to be thicker somehow in this room, her fingers sliding along the smooth wall blindly for a few minutes before she found the switch. She flicked it up and down and gave an annoyed groan as it didn't turn on, the bulb dead.

El stumbled into the room, wincing as she bumped a lamp on the desk and quickly set her gun down the desk to right it, giving a sigh of relief as it steadied. She walked around the desk, dragging her fingers along the edge so she didn't knock into it and opened the many drawers in it, hoping for the cool touch of metal against her fingers, for anything that resembled a key.

She flinched back as her communicator suddenly went to static, buzzing loudly in her ear and barely resisted the urge to pull it out, shying away from the loud noise.

'Max what's going on?' she whispered, tugging on the communicator as the buzzing faded away, confused.

It was silent for a few seconds before Max's voice came through, sounding further away than before, her voice more an echo than anything, going in and out.

'I don't know...something...messing with.... communicators...'

El frowned, before she shook her head, closing the door and pulling another open, groaning as she found this one filled with nothing but

papers, folders and other office material, not a single key in sight.

'Anything El?' Lucas asked, tapping on the wall behind El's head, making her jump. She turned and glared at it for a second before shaking her head, even though she knew he couldn't see her, tapping back at him.

'No, I can't find any keys...'

'And you won't,' a cold voice suddenly said, the words coming out of the darkness. El's breath stuck in her throat, ice-cold fear spreading through her veins as her fingers went limp and nerveless on the handle of the drawer, falling to her sides.

She knew that voice. She had heard it every day for the long years she was held captive, the very sound of having sent shivers down her spine and fear to rush into her tiny body as a child. And she still heard it, in every nightmare she had, him in the starring role.

Brenner. It was Brenner.

A light suddenly flicked on, blinding her as it filled the small space. El stumbled back, blinking rapidly, her heart racing in her chest as she turned to stare at him where he stood framed in the doorway, his blue eyes cold and assessing as they ran over her. Her muscles stiffened, going rigid until she couldn't move an inch, until all she could do was stare at him, chest heaving.

He looked the same, she thought, her mind going deathly quiet, hysteria quivering her insides as she stood there paralysed, pinned in place by just his eyes on her, unable to catch her breath. Like he had stepped out of her memories...or one of her nightmares. The same black suit, pristine and tailored, his hair white as snow and slicked back perfectly on his head. The same cold, hard look in his eyes, face emotionless and blank. Unreadable.

Brenner watched her, gaze unblinking, his expression amused as he saw her silent panic and the fear sliding behind her eyes, darkening them.

'Hello Eleven', he said, as he took a slow deliberate step towards her,

his hand curving around the gun she had stupidly left on the desk, his lip twitching up into a smirk.

'I thought I taught you better than to leave your weapon's unattended', he said, clicking his tongue mockingly at her as he tucked the gun into his pocket before moving back in front of the door. In front of the exit, leaving her trapped inside with him with no weapon and no way out.

El gasped, her breath coming out in a panicked hiss as she took a stumbling step back, eyes wide. She felt Mike settle into the forefront of her mind, sensing her panic and heard his voice bursting along the bond.

El! he said, his voice trembling, his fear for her coating that one word, *What's going on. Speak to me!*

*Mike...*she whimpered, reaching for him frantically, terror rising inside her, choking off every other emotion...*it's Brenner...he found me....*

'Shit', Max gasped in her ear, voice high-pitched and shaking with panic, 'they've done something to the communicators...I can't call for anyone. El, you need to get out. Now!'

I'm trying, El thought, her heart slamming painfully hard against her ribs as her eyes darted around the room, trying to find a window, a vent, anything to escape through. To get away from him.

'You'll be interested to know that this is the only exit', Brenner said, cocking his head to the side as he watched her, lips thinning, as he took a step forward, 'I chose this room for that exact reason.'

El's eye widened, fear racing through her veins as she saw something shift behind his eyes, something cold and calculating and slimy, that sent a chill down her spine. She shuddered with it as she took a careful step back.

She needed to get out. She needed to get out right now. Something wasn't right, she realised, her hands trembling beside her as he moved closer and closer to her. He wanted this. He'd been planning

this. He wanted to get her on her own.

El could barely hear Will and Lucas trying to break in through the wall through the loud buzzing sounding in her ears, screaming her name frantically as they heard Brenner's words. The smell of burning wood filled her nostrils, her nose twitching as she realised Lucas was trying to burn a hole in the wall to get to her.

'You...you knew I was coming...' she choked out, keeping her eyes on Brenner, watching his every move and expression anxiously.

Brenner nodded, his lip curling up into a smile that El knew was supposed to be charming, to put her at ease, as he held his hands out. But all it did was make her insides churn nauseously, bile rising in her throat.

'Of course. I knew who Miss. Robert's was the second she entered the manor. She thought she was being clever, that she had the upper-hand, and I let her. I could've exposed her, I suppose. Thrown her out of the manor before she managed to get the information she was seeking but if I had done that...well, we wouldn't be standing here, would we?' he said, turning that smile onto her, making her shiver.

'If I had taken her out, gotten rid of her as I initially wanted to you never would've come here. I knew you wouldn't be able to stop yourself from helping your dear friend, to come and save her brother. You have always had that need to save others, to protect the weak...it always was your greatest weakness.'

Brenner circled her slowly, barely biting back a wide grin as she skittered away from him, slamming back into the desk with a loud crash. He shook his head at her, amused, before standing still, tilting his head at her.

'I always wondered what happened to you when we didn't find your body the next day. I figured you must have escaped or maybe crawled off and died somewhere else. Honestly...I didn't really care. You were a problem that had taken care of itself. But now...I see you were a bigger problem then I first anticipated. To find out it was you who was feeding the Compound information well, who told them who to arrest and helped to shut down the Labs...that was a shock, I

tell you that. It always eluded me how they always seemed to get one step in front of us, knowing our every move, our routines and our plans but now...I see it all so clearly. I must congratulate you, Eleven. I underestimated you. I never took you for a survivor. Clever girl', he said, clapping slowly, silently mocking her.

El's fingers clenched into fists as her eyes narrowed at him, cocking her head to her side, no longer shaking, her fear replaced with a fury that roared through her. Fury for what he'd done to her, what he'd done to Max's brother and to so many others.

But she couldn't let it control her. She knew that's what he wanted, for her to be distracted so he could get the advantage.

She shook her head inwardly as she took a deep, calming breath, deliberately relaxing her fists until they hung limply by her side. She just had to keep him talking, to keep him distracted until she could find a way to get him away from the door and she could escape.

El stepped around the desk and away from the door, every instinct inside her screaming at her for the decision, and watched as his eyes followed her every step, sharpening like a hawk eyeing its prey, hoping he'd take the bait and follow her, that he'd give her the opening she needed.

She swallowed hard before lifting her chin, her expression deliberately amused as she raised a sardonic eyebrow at him.

'You're mistake, Brenner. You really should have looked more closely. You only saw what you wanted to. I was nothing but a pawn to you, a piece in your little game. Not a person, but a weapon for you to use. Otherwise...why would you have spoken so freely in front of me? I know you didn't think I was listening...or maybe you didn't care, assuming I was too weak, too broken to do anything about it. But you were wrong. You didn't break me. You tired, but you failed. And I used that thing inside me that you tried to destroy to fight you. I listened and I remembered. And I used it all to take you down.'

'Why did you think I killed that monster all those years ago? I knew what you were planning to do with it and I couldn't let that happen. I was willing to die to save the others. How could you do it? Steal

children from their families only to hurt them, to torture and experiment on them and then dispose of them when they were no longer useful? How?' she snapped, eyes narrowing furiously, the mask she had created slipping for a second.

Brenner stared at her, his mouth hanging slack in shock before he shook his head, the shock slipping behind his own mask as a smile curved his lips. The same carefully crafted smile that he would always use when trying to get her to do something awful, that would hurt her or others. Patronising, fake and a lie that she saw through completely.

'We did what we did to save the rest of the world. For the greater good. We needed weapons to use against the Russians, something to give us the upper hand and you children were our best chance, our best defense. You must understand, Eleven, it was the only choice'.

El stared at him, eyes wide with disbelief, as she shook her head slowly, fingers twitching by her side at the lies that slipped so easily from her lips, the lies that, from the earnest look on his face, he truly believed.

'You really believe that, don't you? You're delusional...completely insane. The greater good? That's really what you're going with? You forget...I know everything, Brenner. You weren't doing it for the greater good or even for science, you were doing it for the money. This had nothing to do with the government or the Cold War. You were selling us to the highest bidders to use as personal assassins. You can lie to yourself, but don't try it on me. I know you, and I see you. And you're a lying coward. Oh...and my name is El. I'm more than a number now', she said, lifting her chin and glaring at him, watching as his face darkened, cheeks mottling with furious colour.

Brenner glared back at her, the emotionless mask he usually wore gone, melted away by his hate for her, for seeing through his lies to the true monster beneath. His eyes were somehow still cold within that hot fury, digging and burning into her skin until she felt that cold seeping into her very bones.

His lips curled up into a snarl as something unfocused and deadly shifted across his face, something that made every hair on her body

stand up, a warning signal screaming in her mind.

'I should have killed you myself when I had the chance.'

'As I recall I wasn't worth the bullets', El said, her voice strong and defiant, deliberately mocking, even as her entire body shook uncontrollably, fear a living breathing creature clawing inside her.

Brenner nodded, his lips twisting up into a smirk that made her heart pound in her chest, before he reached inside his perfectly tailored jacket.

'Well...I won't be making that mistake again', he said, pulling out his gun from the sheath of his belt and pointing it at her.

El froze, every muscle in her body stiffening as icy cold terror filled her. Her eyes widened as she saw Brenner's finger press on the trigger and barely had time to squeeze them shut as the loud bang sounded, ringing in her ears, knowing she wouldn't get away in time, waiting for the pain of the bullet...

But it never came.

El opened her eyes, her muscles tensed and rigid as she braced for the icy-hot bite of the bullet, her eyebrows drawing together as she felt only the tiniest sting of pain in her thigh. She looked down slowly and her breath came out in a panicked hiss, her throat squeezing shut as she stared down at the needle sticking out of her thigh, the familiar opaque liquid inside it now draining into her veins.

Blockers.

'No, no, no, no', El choked out, yanking the needle out of her thigh, not even noticing the pain that shot from her as she realised it was too late, icy cold horror coating her insides as she felt the blockers pumping and spreading through her veins, hot and painful.

MIKE! she screamed, her mind scrambling, frantically reaching for him as she felt the link beginning to fade as the blockers spread further and further.

Her chest shuddered up and down in panic as she pressed a hand to

her thigh, pressing hard as if she could squeeze the drugs out. Her muscles spasmed, trying to resist the drugs, even as she felt the bond quickly dying, narrowing down smaller and smaller until it shut closed completely, all his emotions, thoughts, everything that was Mike fading away from her until she was completely alone.

El gasped for breath, her lungs feeling heavy and useless as she tried to draw in air, feeling like she was being ripped apart, the fault-line in her chest shuddering and splitting wide open as she reached for him. But he wasn't there, had no way of reaching back. He was gone.

She felt her powers drain away as well, leashed and held tight by the drugs that pumped through her system, leaving her powerless, at risk, just the way Brenner wanted her. But she barely noticed, her entire being screaming at her as her mind reached panickily for his, distracting her from the danger.

She could only stand there, frozen in place, her heart beating frantically, her eyes unseeing, only looking inwards. Looking for Mike.

'Mike...' she croaked out, the word nothing more than a mere whisper.

'Oh, yes, Mr. Wheeler. He is a problem', Brenner almost cooed, triumph filling him as he stared at her almost catatonic state, rocking back and forth in place, a cold smile curving his lips as she turned stunned, panicked eyes to his, 'Oh, did you think that I didn't know about him? Michael Wheeler, twenty years old, studying engineering, from a small town in Hawkins's, Indiana. I've known about him for years, probably longer than you have, since I traced your soul mark when you were first brought to the laboratories. But don't worry, he won't mourn you for long.'

El felt a spike of fear that shook her slightly from her dazed state, her fingers clenching into shaking fists as she understood what he was saying, sluggish fury replacing the fear.

He was going to try and hurt Mike. Go after him just to hurt her. She couldn't let that happen...wouldn't let that happen. Even if...if she died protecting him. She would be taking Brenner with her.

Mike, she thought, turning to Brenner as he suddenly rushed towards her.

I love you...

****

Mike staggered to a halt in the middle of pacing across the van, his fingers spasming as a sharp pain shot through his thigh, jaw clenching. He froze, chest heaving as fear cut deeply through him, his ears suddenly buzzing as he glanced down and saw nothing, the sting a phantom that had felt so real.

He stumbled backwards as a white-hot rush of pain suddenly spread through his veins, spreading from the phantom wound and outwards into his arms and legs. He gritted his teeth, falling to his knees and slamming his clenched fists onto the ground as it spread fast, his muscles spasming, as if trying to reject whatever it was.

He barely heard Max and Dustin as they jumped to their feet, screaming his name and shaking him panickily, through the sudden buzzing in his ears, his sight blurring.

Mike's head jerked upwards as the pain faded as quickly as it had come, gasping for breath, feeling like he had been punched in the solar plexus, all the air rushing from his lungs as he recognised the hot and painful drug rushing through his bloodstream for what it was.

Blockers. Brenner shot El with blockers. He had her trapped without her powers and without them...she would be defenceless and distracted when.... when the bond died...

His throat tightened at the realisation, unable to breathe as he clawed at the link, his mind empty where before El had been. Everything inside him froze before it seemed to speed up, mind racing frantically as the bond began to fade away with the pain, narrowing down quicker than he could follow.

'No...no, no...NO!', Mike screamed, the terrified sound choking off in his throat, as he heard El's voice cry out for him in his mind before it

was violently cut off, the bond snapping shut completely, leaving nothing but a scar-line in his mind where the link should be. And he was alone.

He ripped his sleeve up and let out a guttural scream as he saw the soul mark was grey and dead like it had been for years before, collapsing forward as he felt the gaping hole in his chest that El had healed split back open, everything inside him gaping and aching. He reached out for her desperately but there was nothing to reach for, the link completely dead. He couldn't feel her anymore.

El! he screamed in his mind, almost vomiting as bile rose in his throat so fast he almost didn't swallow it back, reaching for her frantically, but finding his mind sickeningly empty.

He gasped, his head spinning so dizzily he had to squeeze his eyes shut to keep from passing out. He couldn't pass out now...he needed to get to her. She wouldn't have her powers...she was in danger...He needed to go NOW.

Mike pushed to his feet, swaying, before he ran to the weapons table and grabbed something off it, shoving it in his pocket without even looking at it, not wanting to waste time.

He whirled around to face Max and Dustin who were still knelling on the floor, faces bone white, clutching each other as they stared at him.

'Where is she? Tell me,' he demanded, staring back at Max as she climbed to her feet, shaking her head, her panic leaving her mute.

Mike whirled around, eyes dark and furious, his whole body shaking with the absolute terror that raced through his veins. He flinched, his muscles stiffening as he heard El scream through the mic on the console, his throat tightening as fear sliced through him.

'Damn it, Max, tell me!'

Max burst into tears, wiping at her face desperately as she quickly yelled out her location.

'His office, second floor, fourth door from the right. Hurry, Mike', she

said, watching as he burst out of the van, the door swinging back and forth in his hurried exit, her eyes wide and pale as she heard the struggle coming from the mic, heard El's panicked screams and cries.

She turned, burying her face in Dustin's chest as his arms wrapped around, his whole body shaking around her, face pale as he squeezed his eyes shut, trying to drown out the fear that threatened to drown him.

'El', Max sobbed, holding on tight to Dustin, promising the world anything if Mike could get to her, could save her.

Dustin clutched her back just as hard, hands shaking as their burrowed into her hair, his throat tightening painfully with terror for their friend.

Please be okay, he thought, burying his face in Max's neck.

Mike raced to the house that seemed to be miles away, his heart pounding and lungs burning as he pushed all the speed he had into each stride that felt too slow, his legs too heavy, terror racing through his veins.

I'm coming, El, I'm coming. Just hold on, he screamed down the dead link, into the empty void between them, his mind desperately trying to send his thoughts to her, needing her to know she wasn't alone, that he was coming for her. That he'd find her.

Please don't let me be too late, he thought, begging whatever powers existed to not let him lose her, as he finally ran through the door into the house.

Don't let her leave me...he begged, tears filling his eyes as he swung around the banister and up the stairs...please...

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El's muscles unlocked as Brenner suddenly rushed forward, but not fast enough as he slammed his fist into her stomach, knocking the air from her lungs. El gasped, collapsing forward, distantly surprised there was air in her lungs when it felt like there was hole where her

lungs used to be.

Her chest heaved, coughing hard, as she struggled to draw air back into her lungs but pushed herself back up, everything inside her screaming at her not to give up, to fight back. She lifted her arms, her breath a harsh hiss as she clenched her fingers into fists, dragging her mind back into focus and swung her dark eyes to his blue eyes, all the fear disappearing as pure hatred rose in her, stronger than anything she'd ever felt, as she saw the smug grin twisting his features. Fury for what he'd done to her, what he'd done to Max’s brother and to so many others. For what he threatened to do to Mike and all those she loved.

She charged forward, slamming her knee into his exposed side as he stood there gloating, slamming her elbow up into his jaw as he slumped forwards, clutching his side. He grabbed her arm as she tried to pull back, spinning her around and twisting it behind her back, squeezing it up high.

El let out a high cry, struggled feebly as she felt fear spike in her, reaching back frantically to try to push him away before she felt his throat under her hands and curved her fingers around it, digging her nails in deep and squeezing hard.
Brenner let out an outraged cry, pushing her away, one hand on his throat, the other still clutching her wrist tightly even as she tried to pull back, twisting back and forth under his grip, trying to break his hold.
His eyes darkened with fury as he lifted his hand off his throat and he saw it was coated in a thick coating of blood, a dangerous glint in his eyes that made a warning go off in El's mind, her insides shivering with panic.

She let out a pained cry as his hand smashed across her face, backhanding her, pain vibrating up her jaw as she fell to the ground, landing heavily, her chest heaving violently. She pressed a hand to her cheek, the salty taste of blood filling her mouth from a cut she could splitting open inside her mouth.

El tried to draw in breath, scrambling to her feet before she felt Brenner's weight settle on top of her, pinning her back to the ground. She let out a ear-splitting scream, bucking and squirming beneath

him as he sat down on her stomach, punching and scratching at him, trying to get free. El couldn't breathe, fear cutting deep and tightening her throat until all that could escape was a hissing gasp, as she looked up at him and froze at what she saw in his eyes. Death. Nothing but the emptiness and coldness of death.

She cried out, the sound choking off as Brenner wrapped his hands around her throat, squeezing and crushing her windpipe. El gasped, desperately trying to draw into her burning lungs as she slapped at his hands frantically, her eyes bulging and face going a deep purple. Her legs kicked at the floor, bucking beneath his hold ferociously, trying to break free. But it was no use. He was too strong. She couldn't get free.

She fought him, her hands scrambling on his, nails digging in deep until his blood dripped down her fingers and hands, but it didn't help, he wouldn't budge and only squeezed harder. He was stronger without her powers, she realised, as her vision quickly began to fade, panic rushing into her.

Brenner tightened his fingers, eyes on her face, jaw clenched as he hovered above her, eyes narrowing as he watched her body slowly going sluggish and limp, satisfaction filling him. The girl should've known better than to try to steal from him, to take the boy, and to destroy the empire he had helped build. She was only getting what was coming to her.

Shivering against the rough carpet, suddenly so cold, El's legs and arms went limp and fell heavily to the floor, the darkness come to take her away, and she blinked slowly, trying to get rid of the grey that had begun to form at the edges of her vision.

She stared numbly, her breath coming out a harsh gurgle as the shock began to settle inside her.

No, she couldn't die...not now.... this couldn't be happening...not now they'd finally found each other...she couldn't leave Mike....No, Mike, she thought, her mind scrambling and thoughts disjointed and panicked, her heart breaking as she thought of him...she'd never see him again...never have the life they'd both talked about...never...

Her thoughts cut off as her hands went completely limp by her side, mind fading as her heart began to stutter, slowing to a sluggish pace, her vision fading to a dark grey film and she knew...this was it...she was going to die...as her eyes began to slide shut.

Her head rolled back, sight fading as the darkness dragged her slowly away...

She lunged forward as Brenner was suddenly pulled away, gasping as much-needed air rushed into her lungs, sucking in more and more frantically. She rolled to her knees, coughing hard, one hand rising to her throat, flinching at the raw, burning pulsing of it, feeling like a poker had been shoved down her throat,

El turned her head, her breathing coming in panicked gasps and her sight blurry and indistinct as she stared at the sight in front of her, unable to comprehend what she was seeing.

Brenner's entire body seemed to spasm as a strange buzzing noise filled the air, his face pale, eyes wide and mouth gaping open slackly. She looked behind him, blinking as she struggled to her knees, every muscle in her body seeming to tremble and burn at every movement, and was sure she was hallucinating. That she was still dying on the floor and this was her final vision, as she watched Mike holding a taser to Brenner's side, his mouth pulled up into a snarl.

Mike pulled the taser away, throwing it to the ground as he grabbed Brenner's swaying shoulder, spinning him around to face him, fury roaring to life inside him, the need to hurt him like he'd hurt El, almost choking him. He wanted to kill him, the urge to wrap his hands around his throat and squeeze the life out of him, like he'd been trying to do to El, strong and demanding, and almost impossible to resist.

'You bastard', he screamed, slamming his fist into his face, pain vibrating up his arm as he watched Brenner hit the floor hard and followed him down, his fists hitting his face again and again.

El's sight finally focused and she gaped as she saw Mike in front of her, the panic that had been racing through her veins dissolving completely as she realised it was real. Mike was here, she wasn't

hallucinating. He had saved her.

She crawled across the carpet, groaning quietly as her muscles protested every movement, spasming painfully, but she kept going, needing to get to him. To save him from being changed irrevocably.

Mike couldn't seem to stop, punching Brenner over and over, not stopping even when Brenner's eyes rolled back into his head, going limp and still on the floor, or when the skin on his knuckles split open, his hands swollen and one knuckle sitting a strange angle. His mind was dangerously quiet, a red haze coating it until there was nothing but his fist meeting flesh again and again with a wet thunk and the warm blood coating his fingers.

He needed to make him pay, needed to hurt him as much as he'd hurt El, needed....

Mike froze, his head snapping forward as a small hand covered his, holding on tight and stopping him from landing another blow.

'Mike, no', El gasped out, her voice raspy and harsh as she sat beside him, her legs weak and trembling, every muscle in her body quivering and burning as she grasped his arm, pulling him away from Brenner weakly, tugging as hard as she could as he resisted.

El shook her head, sucking air in as her lungs still seemed to burn, the brush of air in her throat so harsh it felt like she was swallowing shards of glass, and caught his chin in her hand, making him look at her.

She wouldn't let this happen. Wouldn't let Brenner do this, make Mike a killer. She wouldn't let him win.

Mike swung back around to stare at her, his eyes dark and wild, so wide she could see the whites, his hair sticking up everywhere and his face mottled and furious. He sat there stiffly, his shaking fists bruised and covered in blood, both Brenner's and his, eyes glazed and unseeing, puffing for breath.

He stared at her, blinking to bring her into focus through the red haze, ignoring the painful throbbing in his hand that told him it was

more than likely broken. His eyes narrowed, taking in her swollen and bruised face, heart aching at the way her body was shaking, held stiffly and rigid in a way that told him every inch of her was aching, her chest rising and falling in shallow painful gasps and her face pale as snow.

His eyes lowered and he felt shock rush into him as he saw her throat, red and raw, clear dark finger prints circling it and felt the fury rise inside him, the red haze falling over his vision again.

Mike whirled back around, glaring down at Brenner lying unconscious on the ground, his face bruised and bleeding and breaths coming out into harsh, gurgling gasps. But it wasn't enough. It would never be enough.

El shook her head, curling her hand around his fist, not caring about the blood coating it and gently loosened his grip, slipping her fingers between his. She looked up at him, her eyes dark with pain and fear, lips trembling uncontrollably as she clutched his fingers so tight they ached.

'We're not him', she told him, eyes steadfast on his, trying to reach him, to bring him back to her, knowing the struggle that was going on inside him, remembering what she had felt when he had threatened Mike.
She knew the urge he had to hurt Brenner and how hard it was to tame. To resist. But he had to. She wouldn't lose him. She couldn't.

'You can do this. Please, Mike...I need you', she whispered, pressing her face into his shoulder, wrapping her arms around his shuddering waist and holding on tight, trying to ground him like he had her so many times before.

Mike felt the weight of her arms settle against his waist, thumb rubbing gently against his ribs and took a deep shuddering breath, shaking his head from side to side until he could feel the fury fading, the red haze over his mind slowly dissipating. He squeezed his eyes shut tight, not looking at Brenner and found it helped, the rage that threatened to take control again calming.

He slumped, his breath shuddering out, shoulders curling inward as

he began to shake with sobs, turning and burying his face in her shoulder. He pulled backwards after a few seconds, scooping her up and cradling her in his arms so gently tears filled her eyes.

Mike collapsed full to the ground as everything seemed to drain from him, all the anger, fear and horror of the last few minutes, minutes that had felt like eternity, gone now that she was safe and sound and in his arms where she belonged. He was never letting her go again.

He had thought she was dead when he saw Brenner above her, fingers wrapped around her throat, and her eyes closed, her breath nothing but a choking gurgle that was quickly dying. He had never wanted to hurt anyone or anything in his life but he knew if El hadn't stopped him...he wouldn't have been able to stop himself. He would have killed Brenner for hurting her. For trying to take her away.

Mike clutched her closer, burying his face in her throat, as his face crumpled and he sobbed, hot tears spilling down his cheeks.

El felt his tears soaking into her neck and gave a quiet sob of her own, her face contorting with pain, everything sore and aching, protesting his tight grip but she didn't move away, needing his touch as much as he needed hers. She curled her fingers into his hair, wrapping her arms around him weakly, needing to feel him close, the reassurance and comfort of being back in his arms and have him near, to know that he was real and safe when only moments before she had thought....

Her mind hiccups, the mere thought of it, of never seeing him again, never feeling his body against hers, his arms wrapping around her and squeezing tight, looking into his beautiful dark eyes or seeing his crooked smile making it hard to breathe again, the wrongness of it tightening her chest as she snuggled in even closer.

Mike ran his hand along the length of her hair over and over again, comforting her even as he sobbed, the terror slowly draining from, leaving him weak and trembling uncontrollably. El sagged against him, beginning to shake with shock as she clutched him close, her fingers digging into his shirt as she breathed in deeply, dragging the familiar smell of his lemon shampoo into her lungs.

'Oh, Mike…' she whimpered, hot tears filling her eyes.

'It's okay, El, it's okay...he can't hurt you anymore...' he told her, barely resisting the urge to go back and kill Brenner as he heard her voice croak out, every syllable sounding painful as it passed through her throat.

El lifted her head, eyes red and tear-soaked, face flushed and mottled, the angry red skin of her cheek where Brenner had hit her fading while the bruises in on her neck darkened into a sickly purple-black.

Her eyes met his, her lips curling into a wobbling smile.

'You came for me. You saved me.'

Mike's chest rose on a shuddering breath and he hugged her back to him, his hand on the back of her neck and the other burrowing into her curls, being careful of the sore spots he knew she had. He kissed her on the lips, so gently her heart clenched, before pulling back and pressing a soft kiss to her forehead.

'Of course I did.'

They heard the others rush in, voices going hushed as they saw Brenner on the floor and the two of them curled together, but didn't look up, eyes only for one another as they wrapped their arms around each other and held on tight. They weren't ready to look up yet, needing to hold on just a little longer, to reassure themselves that they were safe, alive and together and that nothing was ever going to change that. That no-one and nothing could or would ever tear them apart.

Notes for the Chapter:

> So...what did everyone think? haha Sorry for the major scare in the middle there...please don't hate me!!! Can't wait to hear from you all, I swear it's the only thing that keeps me going. I've been so unmotivated to finish the last chapters (probably cause I know it's ending and it makes me sad!) but I will be, I swear xoxo- Katie

17. Chapter 17

Notes for the Chapter:

> Hey everyone! I'm so sorry it's taken me so long to update. I have been hit with the worst stomach flu I've ever had and have been bed-ridden for days. But because I love you all I thought I'd make the effort to update! :D Not sure when the last chapter will be up but hopefully I get better soon and can start working on it. Ahh, I can't believe it's almost over. :(I think I'm going to cry. I'm going to miss you all so much!!-Katie xx

El swayed down the familiar hallways of the Compound, finally home, her body heavy with fatigue, groaning as she rubbed at the gritty, bleary eyes she could barely keep open.

God, what a morning, El thought as she walked along, her entire body throbbing with every movement, legs feeling like they weighed a ton and her head spinning dizzily as she made her way up to her room, wanting nothing more than to go to bed and sleep for a week. But first... she had to find Mike.

She hadn't seen him since he'd bundled her out of the car when they'd arrived home, wrapped up secure and safe in his arms, and sat her down on the bed in the infirmary before he had been whisked off himself by Hopper, who had insisted on looking at his hand.

El knew she would never forget that moment when Brenner had been pulled off her and she'd seen Mike, standing over him like some knight in the D & D games he liked to write. He was better than any fictional superhero that he looked up to. He was real and he was hers. He was her hero.

Dustin had told her that it'd been only a minute, a single minute, before Mike had reached her but it had felt like hours, an eternity, where she had truly believed she was going to die. But she had been lucky. Or so the doctor Joyce had insisted El see had said. There was no damage to her throat, only minimal bruising and swelling that

would go down in a few days. She was under strict orders to get plenty of rest, to ice her throat throughout the next couple of days and to get putting ointment on the bruises and scrapes Brenner's hands had left behind

Joyce had held her so tight for almost an hour, terrified to let her out of her sight, before she'd finally managed to escape, intent on finding Mike but she had made one stop on her way to her room to do something she knew she needed to. To meet the person who had become as real to her as anyone she knew, from stories Max had told her over the years, but she had never met. Someone she sensed needed her help right now.

El sighed sadly as she thought of how Jackson had looked when she'd walked in the door, lying stiff and afraid in his single bed in the room he'd been given, eyes wide and twitching nervously as he stared at the ceiling. He had jolted when he'd hear the door open, his whole body spasming, and had sat up so fast El had almost fallen back into the door in fright.

They stared at each other for a long moment before El gave a small smile, holding her hands up.

'Hello Jackson', El said, coughing as her voice croaked out, throat still aching and sore, the words scraping past the swollen flesh.

She stared at him, her heart breaking at how young he was, only fifteen as he sat looking at her. Her face softened as she saw how much he looked like his sister, his eyes almost an exact matching shade of blue, his red hair a few shades darker and shaved to the scalp like El's had once been, the same guarded expression that Max often wore stiffening his face.

Jackson sat up in his bed slowly, looking strained and exhausted, every muscle rigid and stiff as if he was waiting for a blow to come. His nervous eyes fell to her throat before they widened with recognition, his mask slipping for a second.

'You're El. Max told me what happened to you. You're the one Brenner tried to kill', he said, voice flat and emotionless.

El flinched at his blunt words before she nodded slowly, moving a little closer, freezing when he scrambled back from her, heat rushing to his cheeks as he realised what he'd done.

She pretended not to notice, glancing around the room with a genuine frown as she found it empty, no sign of Max.

'Where's Max?'

Jackson leant back against his pillow, though every muscle still vibrated, ready for action if needed to run, or to fight, still in survival mode. It would take him a long time to switch off that instinct, an experience El knew all too well, and felt her heart clench as she wondered what must have happened to him, what Brenner had forced him to do or done to him.

'She’s with...' Jackson's face scrunched up in confusion, his eyebrows drawing together, 'I... I can't remember his name but she told me he's her soulmate...?'

El nodded, smiling as she moved forward slowly and perched on the edge of his mattress.

'Dustin. I think you'll like him. He's one of my best friends and just the best guy.... but I'm sure you'll meet him later. How are you, Jackson?' she asked, her eyes searching his, watching as his face hardened before he shrugged.

'I'm fine.'

El shook her head, her lip pulling up into a sad smile.

'No, you're not. How could you be? I understand how you feel...'

When Jackson sent her doubtful look, sniffing and looking away from her, El shifted closer, placing a hand lightly over his on top of the covers. Her eyes began to burn with unshed tears as he flinched away from her, his eyes going wide with panic, knowing how hard it was to break that particular habit, how to learn that not every touch would lead to punishment or be used a bribe, a way for the bad people to get you to do horrible things.

'I know everyone says that they understand and they really don't, they're just trying to make you feel better but Jackson…I really do understand. I was one of the experiments. I was kept in the Labs for six years.'

Jackson's head snapped towards her, shock filling his face as he sat up further, looking at her in different light as the anger and defiance in his eyes faded a bit.

'You were?'

El nodded.

'I was only known as Eleven for a very long time. The Department of Energy took me from my Mom and kept me prisoner just like you. But one of our group...Will… he saved me. I was almost dying and he literally plucked me out of the snow where'd they left me. When I first came here I felt lost and alone for a while. I was so confused by everything I saw and didn't understand a lot of it. I was easily frustrated those first few months but the others...they never gave up on me. They helped me adjust, to learn...they taught me everything I know about the world. And they will do the same for you.'

'You're going to be okay, Jackson', El told him, squeezing his hand tight between hers as his face crumpled slightly, tears filling his eyes, 'It's going to be hard for a while, I'm not going to lie, but it will get easier and the others who live here will help you like they helped me. You are never going to be locked away again. I just wanted you to know that because I know how hard it is to believe it at first but...there is a way back. You just have to take it.'

Jackson sniffled, wiping at his eyes as he let out a shuddering breath and slumped against the bed, before he squeezed them shut.

'I'm sorry. I guess...I had to pretend to be so cold and obedient...to put on a mask for so long, that it's going to take me a while to stop the habit. To not be afraid', he said, opening his eyes to look at her again.

El shook her head, smiling softly, causing him to look at her in confusion, before she glanced down pointedly at their hands where

Jackson had unconsciously slipped his fingers between hers, clinging to her hard. Jackson blinked, his breath coming out in a shocked as he saw it and lifted his eyes back to hers.

'Maybe not as long as you think.'

Jackson stared at her for a long moment before he grinned, the smile so bright and full of joy she couldn't but grin back. She knew in that moment that he really stood a chance. He was going to be okay.

They both glanced up, letting go of each other's hands, as the door suddenly swung open and Max stepped in, her face paler than usual, dark circles hanging under her eyes. She skidded to a halt halfway across the room as her eyes landed on El, her hands shaking on the tray she held, filled with food for Jackson.

Max's chin wobbled as her eyes dipped to El's throat, her eyes welling before she suddenly burst into heart-wrenching sobs. She blindly placed the wobbling tray onto a nearby dresser before she buried her face in her hands, shaking her head.

'Max', El gasped out, jumping off the bed, catching Jackson's worried look out of the corner of her eye as he watched his sister. She ran towards Max, her arms held out, her heart breaking at the sight of her crying so hard, obviously devastated.

Max shook her head quickly, holding up a hand that halted El in her tracks, her face scrunching in confusion. Max lifted her head after a few minutes, wiping at her hot and wet face, lips trembling as she looked at her friend.

'Oh my god...El...' she sobbed, her face twisting with guilt as she took in the damage Brenner had left behind, 'your neck...'

El gave a wobbly smile, stepping towards her.

'Max, I'm okay...'

'No, no...' Max said, swinging around abruptly, her eyes red-rimmed as they fell to the floor, unable to meet her eyes, guilt almost choking her, 'this is all my fault. Brenner...he knew who I was....and he planned this...let me stay so he could...he knew you would help me

and he used me to...so he could hurt you...I'm so sorry...'

El shook her head, expression suddenly fierce as she walked forward and grabbed Max's shoulders, shaking her slightly so she would look at her.

'It's not your fault, Max. You didn't do anything wrong. It was all him. He did this. He's the one that used the fact that you wanted to save your brother to try and do something monstrous/hurt me. All you wanted to do was help your brother. Don't ever feel guilty for that', El said, pulling Max into her arms and hugging her tight.

Max held herself stiffly before she burst into fresh tears of relief, all the fear and guilt that had been twisting her insides nauseously for the last few hours fading slightly. She knew it would never fully go away, that she would never truly forgive herself for what happened to El, even if it wasn't her fault, but to know that she didn't blame her helped the guilt loosen and fall away.

'I was so scared, El. I thought you were dead', Max said, as she pulled back, wiping at her wet eyes.

El gave a small chuckle, flinching as her throat tightened.

'Me too for a second there. But I'm okay and I'm going to keep being okay. Mike got there in time. He saved me,' she told her, her voice softening, lips curving into an almost mushy smile.

Max laughed, shaking her head as she glanced at Jackson who was watching them with undisguised interest and moved in closer, lowering her voice.
'From the sounds of it, Mike seriously kicked Brenner's ass. He had to be taken out of there in a stretcher. I have to admit...that's kind of hot', she said, wiggling her eyebrows at El, making her burst out laughing.

Oh, it was definitely hot, El thought, smirking slightly as she began to climb the stairs to the third floor, her fingers clutching the banister tightly to keep from toppling backwards, her muscles twitching and burning, protesting the number of steps.

She jolted, her fingers digging into the wood, suddenly dragged from her thoughts as she felt the bond shiver to life inside her. Her stomach fluttered as she felt the familiar pull on her ribs, a tugging that was weak but there, leading her towards Mike.

El's heart skipped a beat, her eyes widening and she couldn't help the smile that began to curve her lips as she realised the blockers were finally fading from her system, the tightness that had squeezed her chest since the bond had died loosening.

She could feel him faintly through the link, just behind the thin and quickly cracking wall that the blockers had formed and smile as she raced up the stairs as fast as her weak legs could go. She ran her fingers along the bond that was quickly getting stronger and stronger, the blues and golds that were him and her brightening with every step she took, and felt it tug under her ribs, almost impatient.

She turned the corner eagerly and let out a quiet gasp as her body collided with another, bouncing her backwards. A hand snapped forward immediately, fingers wrapping around her arm gently and catching her before she could fall to the ground. El lifted her head and felt everything inside her soften as her eyes met Mike’s soft, dark ones.

A feeling of rightness spreading through her entire body as she reached up and cupped his face in her hands, smiling gently as she saw his eyes grow wet, leaning up and brushing her lips against his in a kiss that said everything. Home. She was home.

'Hey', she said against his lips as she pulled back, settling back onto her feet.

'Hey', Mike said, letting out a quiet sigh as he felt the bond snap back into place as they touched, the thin wall between their minds shattering into dust. A crooked smile quirked his lips as he pressed his forehead to hers, squeezing his eyes shut.

She was here. She was safe, he thought, his breath rushing out of his lungs as the thing that had been tight and aching inside him since they'd been separated unravelled and loosened.

He reached up without thinking to brush her hair back and let out a harsh cry as sharp pain spasmed through his hand, immediately dropping it back down to his side with an annoyed grumble.

El's eyes snapped open wide as she saw the pained grimace twisting his face and glanced down panickily, her stomach clenching as she saw his hand was wrapped up tightly with gauze.

'Mike!' she gasped, horrified.

'Oh yeah,' Mike said, reaching up to rub the back of his neck, his expression sheepish, 'I... uh...broke it.'

El wrapped her hands around his hand carefully, her expression devastated, before she pressed her lips to the bandage gently, lifting her eyes to his.

Mike's eyes softened and he gently pressed his thumb to her chin, raising it so he could see her neck properly. His jaw tightened for a second as he saw the clear fingerprints marking her pale skin before he deliberately loosened it, not wanting her to worry about him breaking down again, as he gently brushed his fingers against them.

'How are you feeling?' he asked, voice soft.

'I'm alright,' El said quickly, the answer automatic, after being asked the question, what felt like, a hundred times already. She didn't want anyone to worry about her any more than they already were.

Her voice trailed off, however, as she saw the way Mike narrowed his eyes at her, raising his eyebrows in disbelief and gave a deep sigh, her shoulders slumping forward as she grumbled under her breath, annoyed at not being able to pretend with him like she could everyone else.

'I'm sore', she said with a shrug, trying not to make a big deal of it, 'but I'll heal. I'm okay, Mike. Because of you. If you hadn't...'

Mike's face crumpled slightly as her voice faded, the words she couldn't say aloud echoing silently between them. He had almost lost her today...if he had been a few seconds later, she would've been gone before he could reach her. The very thought made him want to

sob, his throat tightening until he almost couldn't breathe.

He moved closer, wrapping his arms gently around her, being careful not to squeeze too hard, and tugged her close, pressing his mouth against her temple in a soft kiss.

'I wanted to kill him for hurting you,' he admitted silently and felt her arms settle around his waist, squeezing gently.

'I know', she said, catching his uninjured hand in hers and holding it to her chest, her warm brown eyes on his dark ones, her face full of understanding.

'But I'm glad you didn't. He doesn't get to do that, to change us, to make us like him. He's going to go to prison and he's never getting out. That has to be enough', she said, silently begging him to agree, to forget about Brenner, to leave him behind in the past where he belonged. No longer haunting or plaguing them.

Mike nodded after a long minute, his breath shuddering out, before he lifted their joined hands to his mouth.

'You're right. He’s nothing to us anymore.’

They turned as one and walked silently down the hall to El's old room, closing the door behind them and climbed into the bed, pulling the covers up as they turned to face each other, lying on their sides.

El moaned as she lay back on the soft mattress, every ache in her body dimming slightly as she relaxed fully and closed her eyes for a second. She carefully snuggled in closer to Mike's lanky frame on the bed and sighed as she felt Mike's hand settle gently on her hip, squeezing softly as he lay his head down beside hers on the same pillow, their breath mingling as they lay there, just soaking each other in.

'I can't believe it's really over', El said quietly, the reality of it, of being truly free of him and her past not fully sinking in yet, 'the Department of Energy is completely gone. They've all been caught. We finally stopped them'.

It was over, she thought, shock racing through her veins as her head

lifted slightly off the pillow. She would never have to think about him again or worry or be afraid that he would someday come for her and try to take her back. He was gone, locked away for good and she was safe to live the life she had always wanted. The life Mike and she had imagined together. She was free.

Mike grinned at her, reaching up to brush her hair back from her face.

'Believe it, El. It's really over. You did it.'

El shook her head at him.

'We did it', she said quietly, thinking proudly of the people that had become her family, who had stopped at nothing to help save children they had never known and to take down the men and woman who had created so much horror in the world.

She would never have been able to take them down on her own. They had stopped them together and she would never not be grateful to the people she loved, especially since she knew they didn't want or expect it at all.

Mike leant over her as she watched him curiously, smiling reassuringly before he pressed his lips to her neck, kissing every bruise and scrape that marked her delicate skin, soothing the throbbing pain of it with just his touch.

El arched her neck back with a quiet sigh, her hand settling on his head and twining in his soft dark hair.

Mike let a long breath as he laid his forehead against hers.

'I almost lost you. That was...last night was the most scared I've ever been in my life...I didn't think I'd get there in time and when...when the link died...I thought…', he swallowed hard as a lump suddenly formed in his throat, squeezing his eyes shut as his face crumpled.

El's chin trembled as she saw the tears he tried to hide from her gleaming in his eyes before he closed them and wrapped her arms around him, pulling his head to her chest as she ran her hand up and down his back soothingly.

'No, Mike, please...shush, it's okay. I'm okay. I know, I felt it too. I thought I'd die and he'd come after you...that he'd hurt you and I wouldn't be able to stop him. I thought I'd never see you again'.

Mike sniffled as he lifted his head, wiping his running on his sleeve, his eyes suddenly begging.

'Please...I know this is something you need to do but...I don't know if I can through it again...'

El's eyes widened as she realised what he was saying and shook her head frantically, sitting up and grabbing his shoulders, her expression fierce.

'Never again. I said it last night and I meant it. I am never going on another mission, and I am never leaving you again. I promise. I am done with all that. I don't need it. All I need is you. You and our lives together. That's all I want...'

Mike's lips trembled as he leant forward, catching her mouth with his and kissing her, holding her face gently in his hands. El kissed him back, their tears mingling until they could taste salt on both their lips as they moved in closer, their bodies pressing against one another's, their hearts pounding together.

They settled back onto the bed after a while, El laying her head on Mike's chest and listening to the frantic beat of his heart slow back to normal with a soft smile. They lay there for a long time, El tracing patterns on Mike's chest as they both dozed, exhausted from their traumatic morning.

El suddenly stilled as a thought suddenly slipped into her mind, the idea so out of no-where, that it made her heart begin to race in her chest, her mouth going dry.

No…she couldn't ask that. It was crazy…insane…. She was being silly even thinking about it. It was definitely too soon…wasn't it?

But it didn't feel too soon. It felt…right, she thought, her insides warming as she rose up onto her elbow to peer into his peaceful face, a slow smile curving her lips at the way his fingers tangled

unconsciously in her curls that lay over his arm, his breathing even and slow.

The irresistible urge to ask, to just the let words slip out, was overwhelming as she lay there and she couldn't deny how perfect the moment suddenly seemed. And she knew that this was something she truly wanted, a fact that only months ago would have shocked her. But now…she had begun to want it ever since she'd met Mike, since the first moment her eyes had met his and she had felt her heart begin to race and butterflies flutter to life in her stomach. Since she had felt that undeniable pull towards him that, even almost six months later, hadn't gone away and she knew now never would.

'Mike...' she said quietly, watching as his eyebrows drew together, his eyes opening to slits as he smiled sleepily at her.

'Hmm...' he said, twisting his finger around one of her curls as he slung an arm around her waist, pulling her in close.

El laughed slightly as she was almost squished down onto the mattress and wiggled closer with a lot of effort and muffled grunts before she pressed her lips to his ear and whispered the question that she could no longer hold back.

'Marry me?'

Mike jolted upwards, his eyes snapping open, suddenly wide awake as he gaped at her.

'W-what?' he stuttered out, his heart beginning to race in his chest as his palms grew sweaty, nerves stirring to life inside his stomach, sure he must have heard her wrong. That he had somehow imagined the life-changing words that had come out of her mouth.

El giggled at the look on his face as he stared at her, mouth hanging open, eyebrows high on his forehead and leant forward to cup his cheek, caressing the line of his jaw with her thumb.

'Marry me, Mike', she said again, giving him the half-smile he loved.

Her smile dimmed slightly as he continued to gape at her, eyes wide and stunned as he sat there unmoving, dumbfounded, unable to

comprehend her words.

Oh god, I've freaked him out, she thought, panicking silently as she clutched her fingers in front of her. What was she thinking? They'd only been dating for two months. Of course he's freaking out. Argh, what have you done, El?

'I mean...you don't have to if you don't want to...it was just an idea...a stupid idea...just forget I said anything…', El said, shifting uncomfortably on the bed, her cheeks flushing brightly with embarrassment.

Mike shook his head, coming out his shocked stupor and put a finger to her mouth to stop her uncharacteristic, nervous babbling.

'El! he said, letting out a small shocked laugh, a startled smile curving his lips as he squinted at her, eyebrows drawing together.

El took a deep, shaking breath and slowly turned her eyes back to his, her lips pressed together to keep them from trembling, not wanting him to see how nervous she was, though she was certain he could feel it through the link.

'You're mine and I'm yours, right?'

Mike's face softened and he lifted a hand to brush a curl behind her ear, nodding.

'That's never going to change.'

The nerves that had tightened El's chest loosened slightly and she slumped forward, clutching at Mike's hands as she pushed out the words that were getting stuck in her throat.

'I know. So…I mean...we both know we're heading there anyways...that'll we'll eventually get married so why not now? And …I…I want to start our lives together as soon as possible'.

Mike blinked at her stupidly for a long moment, mouth opening and closing before he finally managed to get any words out.

'You're serious? You really want to marry me?'

El nodded, her fear falling away as she saw the stunned look in his eyes and leaned up to brush her mouth against his, her fingers slipping between his and holding on tight. Her eyes filled with happy tears and her lips parted into a brilliant smile as she pulled back to look at him.

'I do. I've never wanted anything more. I love you, Mike. You're everything to me. You're my home, my life. I want to be your wife.'

Mike's face split into a giant smile as the shock that had taken over his body was replaced by an overwhelming burst of happiness. He let out an excited yell and threw himself on top of her, twisting so he didn't hurt her and caught her face in his hands, kissing her hard as one hand burrowing into her hair, the other curving around her hip.

El moaned, kissing him back, smiling against his lips. She pulled back after a while, gasping for breath and smiled happily when he leant down and brushed his nose against hers gently, grinning down at her.

'Is that a yes?' she said, voice teasing, feeling so light and happy, like if she wasn't holding his hand she would float away.

Mike blushed, narrowing his eyes at her before his face softened, unable to keep up even the pretence of being annoyed he was so happy, and flicked her nose gently.

'Brat. What do you think? I've wanted this...I've wanted you for as long as I can remember. Of course I want to marry you too, you idiot. I love you so much, El', he said, kissing her again before lifting his head and running his knuckle along the curve of his cheek, smiling, 'When do you want to do it?'

'Tomorrow?' El asked, rising to sit beside him, resting her hands on his knees as she saw his smile somehow grow even wider, his hands coming up to rest on top of hers, 'I don't want to wait a minute longer.'

Mike nodded eagerly and leant forward to catch her mouth in a quick peck.

'Me either. Tomorrow it is. Oh my god, we're getting married

together', he said, bouncing on the bed, making her laugh before pouncing on her and peppering her face with kisses, moving quickly down her jaw.

El smiled even as she groaned, wrapping her arms his neck to balance her and moved down to nip at his chin, her stomach quivering hotly as she saw his eyes darken. She arched her head back to grant him access to her neck and let out a loud cry, flinching as her throat throbbed, pain shooting through it and up into her jaw.

Mike's eyes widened and he pulled away hastily, moving to the other side of the bed so fast El could've swore he blurred slightly, placing a restraining hand on her arm when she went to follow him.

'No…not till after you're healed', he said, tone serious, as he shook his head frantically.

El pouted, giving him puppy-dog eyes for a minute before she let out a sigh, knowing he was right.

Mike watched her warily as she moved in closer, relaxing when she just laid her head on his shoulder.

'Are you really sure?' he asked after a few minutes of silence, nuzzling his chin against her forehead.

El groaned, exasperated, rolling her eyes to the roof, silently begging for patience.

'Seriously Mike?'

Mike blinked at her for a few seconds in confusion before the bewilderment that had his eyebrows drawing together faded and he let out a laugh, shaking his head.

'No, I didn't mean are you sure you want to get married…I meant are you sure you want to do it tomorrow. You don't want to wait and have a big wedding?'

El immediately shook her head, eyes softening as she looked at him.

'I don't need a big wedding, Mike. I have everything I need right

here', she said, taking his hand and squeezing it gently, smiling at the way his eyes brightened at her words, his hand tightening on hers, 'I just want you, me and our families. That's all I need to be happy. Oh…and we're going to have to tell them soon.'

'How about at lunch? But not before we have a sleep. I'm exhausted', he said, wrapping around her waist and laying down beside her as she immediately laid back with an eager nod, yawning loudly even though it was only ten-thirty in the morning.

'God yes! I could sleep for a week, I'm so tired.'

They curled up together and drifted off almost instantly, Mike's arm wrapped around El's waist from behind and El's hand clutched both of his, holding on tight, content and secure in each other's arms.

**

El and Mike wandered out of their room a few hours later, clutching each other's hands as they walked along, feeling rested and almost buzzing with excitement about what they were about to announce. They walked down the stairs and paused when they reached the doorway of the living room, grinning as they found everyone lounging across the couches and floor playing Monopoly together, their eyes moving over the group.

Dustin sat cross-legged on the floor grinning smugly as he slowly counted the piles of money in front of him, almost a dozen hotels and houses in his possession. He let out a quiet whoop as Nancy landed on one his hotels, rubbing his hands together like an evil genius in a film, and dramatically held out his hand to her. Nancy gave a heavy sigh before reluctantly handed him a stack of brightly coloured money, rolling her eyes as he giggled gleefully, a small smile quirking her lips.

Max lay on the ground beside Dustin, her legs flung over his lap and grinned widely as he handed her the cash, obviously sharing his loot with her, and stuck her tongue at Lucas as he pointed an accusatory finger at them with a gasp, her expression smug and pleased with herself.

Joyce and Hopper were sat together on the couch opposite the game, watching with amused expressions as they talked quietly, steaming cups of coffee in their hands that they sipped slowly. Steve was dozing on the couch across them, a large pillow pulled over his head as he let out a loud snore and Jonathan sat on the floor beside Nancy, leaning back against her shoulder as took photos of everyone, the rhythmic click of the camera audible within the breaks of conversation, the sound comforting and familiar.

It was clear that they were all trying to keep the game quiet, obviously worried about waking El and Mike, their voices hushed, shushing each other continuously when they got too excited or loud, but they were still having fun, bickering good-naturedly and ribbing each other with playful pushing, elbowing and laughter.

El giggled quietly, slapping a hand to her mouth as she lifted bright eyes to Mike's and almost burst out laughing as she saw Mike's chest shaking with unshed laughter as Will suddenly let out a muffled yell, throwing the dice as he glowered down at the board.

'Again? Seriously', Will groaned, pouting slightly before he reluctantly forward and slammed his game piece down onto the jail symbol, crossing his arms over his chest with a huff.

Lucas chuckled as he wrapped an arm around Will's shoulder as he pouted and squeezed gently, leaning forward to press a kiss to his cheek. He laughed when Will let out a quiet sputter, not used to the attention, his cheeks going bright red even while his lips curved up into a shy smile.

Max sat up to reach for the dice for her turn, glancing over at the door absent-mindedly and blinked when she saw El and Mike in the doorway, her eyes going wide for a second in surprise before she smiled and nudged Dustin gently in the ribs.

Dustin jolted, frowning down at Max before he followed her gaze and his face erupted into a wide grin.

'Well hello sleepy-heads, it's about bloody time you got up.'

Everyone turned to look as they walked in, all the conversations

hushing for a second, their eyes running over them both worriedly, watching the way El was still walking gingerly and the bandage around Mike's hand.

Mike rolled his eyes, lazily giving Dustin the finger, making him chuckle as the stepped over the group and made their way to the couch.

'We weren't too loud, were we?' Hopper asked, voice soft and gravelly, his eyes squinting as he studied them, expression concerned, as they sat at Steve's feet, who had jolted awake when they'd come in and shifted so they could sit with a sleepy grin.

Mike shook his head, silently answering the question even as he lifted his arm so El could snuggle in beneath it, feeling her self-consciousness pulsing down the bond, making him want to squirm and hide as well.

El nuzzled in closer gratefully, leaning her head against his shoulder, knowing he could feel how on edge she was through the link, at having everyone's eyes on her, even though she knew they were only worried about her. She sighed happily as she felt his arm settle around her waist, his fingers caressing her side, feeling the squirmy feeling in her stomach disappear, his heartbeat against her soothing her even further.

El lifted her eyes to Hopper's worried ones and gave a small smile, shaking her head as well.

'No. We didn't hear a thing after we finally crashed'.

Hopper nodded, his stiff face relaxing slightly after he studied her for a long moment, seeing the colour that returned to her cheeks after her sleep and how the pain that had darkened her eyes had almost completely faded.

'Good.'

'How are you feeling?' Jonathan asked, reaching out to place a hand on El's knee, his eyebrows knitting together as he studied her face intently.

El's face scrunched up at the question, already sick of answering that question but gave a tired and, she hoped, reassuring smile as she answered, instinctively knowing she was going to hear it over and over until she had fully healed.

'My throat's still sore but it definitely feels less swollen so…I can't complain', she said, shrugging as she leant more heavily against Mike, still exhausted even though she'd slept for almost three hours.

'We checked on you for lunch but you were still sleeping so we thought we'd leave you be. There's plenty of soup leftover if you want it. We thought it'd be the best thing to cook with…. uh…with your throat', Nancy said, smiling even as she twisted her fingers in her lap, before pushing herself up and to her feet, 'Do you want me to get you some?'

Mike nodded eagerly, flushing bright red when his stomach grumbled loudly, everyone bursting into startled laughter. The worried atmosphere that had hung over them, making every moment tense and hesitant was suddenly broken as they all relaxed at the sight of El laughing, her brown eyes warm and bright, the realisation that was safe and alive finally settling in completely.

They both ate ravenously, barely stopping for breath, when Nancy brought them the steaming bowls of chicken noddle soup, though El ate more carefully, her throat still swollen and sore, as the food scraped against the rawness inside painfully.

Everyone continued playing as they gate, sometimes asking them questions now that all the chaos and urgency of the day before was gone, unable to contain their curiosity about Mike and El had finally found each other and discovered who they were to each other.

El and Mike each told their sides of the story, letting the other speak and smiling at each other as they said things they'd never even said aloud before, such as how guilty Mike had felt when he first started to fall for El, feeling like he'd been cheating on his soulmate, and how El had used her powers to cheat in the floor is lava game ('I knew it!' Dustin yelled, jumping to his feet with a mock-outraged expression which made El fall back against the couch, laughing uncontrollably).

El blushed bright pink when Mike told them all about the night she got drunk, pulling a pillow over her face with an embarrassed giggle, refusing to come out for a few minutes.

'So what are your plans now? I mean…' Joyce trailed off, her eyes going wide as her cheeks flushed, her hands flapping in the air as if she was trying to physically pull the words back, laughing sheepishly, 'not that I'm trying to get rid of you. I'd be happy for you both to stay as long you want but I know you have to go back to the city for school and work…'

Mike bit his lip, to hold back the wide grin that wanted to spread across his face as he wrapped his hand around El's hand and turned to look at her with a questioning look, his dark eyes soft on hers. El nodded, her lips tilting up into a small smile that held everything, all the love she held for him and the excitement building inside her for what they were about to do, and nodded quickly.

Joyce watched them, her heart beginning to race for a reason she couldn't put her finger on, everything inside her standing to attention as she saw the secret smile they were exchanging and the looks in their eyes.

Mike shrugged casually, his thumb running over El's knuckles back and forth as he felt the excitement thrumming through him, not entirely sure if it was his or hers, or a combination of both, barely stopping himself from racing around the room like a little kid and yelling out the news for the whole world to hear.

El Hopper is going to be my wife. She's going to marry me, he thought, the idea still blowing his mind as he held back a slightly hysterical laugh, inwardly fist-pumping the air.

El giggled as his thoughts trickled down the link, eyes softening as her insides went warm and squirmy at how much he truly loved her, knowing exactly how he felt. She had never thought she'd truly have this, that she'd find him and the type of love that people wrote and sang about, so strong and true that it was often overwhelming, making her ache with the beauty and rareness of it. She sometimes woke up in the middle of the night convinced that it had all been a dream only to find him sleeping peacefully beside her and would just

lay there and marvel that he was here and that he was hers. Truly and utterly hers.

She leant forward to press her lips to his cheek, her eyes prickling with tears, as Mike spoke.

‘Well…I have to get back for exams in a few days but first…’ he trailed off, squeezing El’s hands as she looked at her Mom, her lips spreading into a brilliant smile that she could no longer hold back.

‘But before we left we thought we’d get married. You know…cause why not’, El said, her voice light and casual as she shrugged, biting her lip to hold back a laugh as all the conversations in the room came to an abrupt halt, everyone’s heads snapping towards them, their expressions stunned as someone let out a startled giggle, mouth’s hanging open.

'Wait, what?’ Lucas gasped out, his eyes shocked and disbelieving.

‘What did you just say?’ Nancy asked, a slow smile stretching across her face as she stared at them, excitement and joy making her voice shake.

El grinned at the stunned group, flicking Mike a loving smile as he looked down at her adoringly, leaning down to press a soft kiss to the corner of her mouth before she turned back to face their families, who waited with bated breath.

‘Mike and I are getting married.’

There was stunned silence before the room erupted into chaos and noise, everyone yelling and talking over each other excitedly, before they raced towards them. Their friends reached them first, almost knocking them both over, and wrapped their arms around them in a massive group, everyone swaying and bouncing with excitement, talking over one another.

‘Holy shit!’

‘I can’t believe…’

‘When did the hell did this happen?’

‘Married! You’re getting married!’

‘Are you serious?’

Mike laughed at all the questions as he stepped back, one arm wrapped around El’s shoulder as he pulled her to his side and looked at their friends, who’s eyes were still wide with shock that was quickly fading, wide grins on all their faces.

‘Never been more serious in my life’, he told Will, who looked like he was going to cry, grinning when Max punched his shoulder with a wide excited smile.

‘Good for you, buddy.’

Nancy and Joyce hugged each other tightly as they cried, jumping up and down with joy, as their husbands stood beside them, looking amused and still shocked by the news, exchanging bewildered looks.

They were separated as Hopper came over to shake Mike’s hand with Jonathan and Steve by his side. They slapped him on the back in their version of congratulations, grinning as Mike beamed back, almost vibrating with happiness as he looked at El over the crowd as she was hugged by Nancy, dark eyes crinkling as he smiled at her.

El smiled back, her eyes warm and bright, her cheeks beginning to ache from smiling so much but she couldn’t seem to stop, so much happiness rushing into her she was sure she could explode from it and wouldn’t even care.

She turned and Joyce stepped towards her, her brown eyes creased as she studied her daughter’s face intently for a second before reaching up and cupping it in hands that were trembling with wonder, eyes bright and wet with unshed tears.

‘Are you really happy? This is what you really want? Because if you’re not sure, if you not ready for marriage just yet, there’s no rush, honey. You’re going to have each other forever no matter what.’

El nodded, tears filling her eyes as she looked at her Mom, her smile almost splitting her face.

‘I’m sure, Mom. I've ever been more sure of anything in my life. I've been in love with Mike since I was thirteen and I want to marry him. I don't want to wait another minute longer'.

Joyce's softened before crumpling slightly, a bright smile curving her lips even as her eyes filled with tears of joy.

'That all I need to hear, sweetie,' she said, before she suddenly gasped, eyes going wide, 'Oh my god, wait...did you say you want to get married now? Today?'

El laughed, tilting her head as she gave a mock-thoughtful look.

'Well...I guess we could wait till tomorrow', she joked, sending Mike an amused look as he walked over to her side and wrapped an arm around his waist, kissing her temple, his breath shuddering against her skin as he laughed quietly.

'Tomorrow?' Joyce said, her eyes somehow widening even more, panic making her voice high and shaky, 'but we don't have anything organised...you need somehow to do the ceremony and what about...I mean...where are you even going to have it?'

El reached out and grabbed Joyce's arm, gently tugging her Mom to face her and giving her a soft smile.

'Deep breath, Mom. It's going to be alright. We have it all worked out. Mike has already booked a celebrant for the ceremony.'

Mike nodded, resting his head on El's curls as Joyce swung around to look at him, the panic that had darkened her eyes fading slightly as he gave her a reassuring smile.

'He'll be here tomorrow around four and he said because we're soulmates it makes it even easier because we don't need any special licenses.'

'And... we were thinking we could have it in the garden, if you guys don't mind. I've always loved it out there and Mike think it's perfect as well. I don't need anything big, Mom. I have everything I want right here', she said, giving Mike a loving look before she looked at everyone else who smiled back, anticipation filling everyone.

'Of course we don't mind, El. Whatever makes you happy,' she said, squeezing her hand.

'Well....if we're doing this there's so much to do', Nancy said suddenly as she stepped forward, her eyes focused and narrowed in a way that made Mike, Jonathan and Steve shift nervously, eyeing her warily, knowing that in this mood she would stop at nothing until she got what she set her mind on finished, 'We need to decide where in the garden we'll set up, there's food and music and decorations...Joyce do you have anything we could use?'

Joyce's expression grew thoughtful, biting her lip for a second before she nodded decisively.

'I'm pretty sure we have some lights from Christmas and decorations leftover from Will's last birthday in the basement...Jim, do you mind going down and having a look?'

Hopper chuckled as he nodded, giving a false heavy sigh.

'Yes, dear,' he said, in a false put-upon sigh that made Joyce roll her eyes, grinning as he winked at her and made his way out of the room. He paused in front of El, his eyes going soft as he looked at, leaning down to kiss her on the cheek.

'Congratulations, Elly.'

El grinned, jumping up and wrapped her arms around his neck to give him a tight hug, closing her eyes as she felt his bear-like arms surround her.

'Will you walk me down the aisle?' she asked in a whisper, her lips trembling as she heard his breath suddenly hitch, his arms tightening around for a second before he slowly lowered her to the ground.

Hopper pulled back, his chin wobbling slightly as he swallowed past the sudden lump in his throat and nodded, reaching up to run a hand down her hair gently.

'I'd be honoured', he told her, voice gruff and wet as he kissed her on the forehead, before hurrying out the room, his head ducked down so no-one could see the tears he was rapidly blinking back.

El blinked back a few tears of her own and turned back to the conversation, her mouth falling open as she saw Nancy and Joyce sitting together on the couch, a notepad on their laps as they planned, everyone else watching with wide-eyes and sometimes throwing in ideas, calling over each other excitedly.

'Told you we should have gone to Vegas', Mike joked from beside her, shaking his head at the chaos in front of them, 'it's not too late.'

El giggled, pursing her lips in mock-thought, but the sound died in her throat as Nancy's head snapped towards them, eyes narrowing as she looked at them, gulping at the dangerous expression on her face.

Who would have thought...Nancy was terrifying.

Mike flinched as Nancy suddenly rose to her feet, hands on her hips as she tapped her foot at them, knowing how serious she could get in one of these moods. He was so screwed.

'Oh, no you don't, Michael Wheeler. There will be no running off. We are going to give you the best wedding in existence.'

El stiffened slightly at Nancy's words, suddenly worried she would go overboard and sent Mike a pleading look. Mike took her hand, squeezing reassuringly, as he turned back to Nancy, his expression stern.

'Simple Nancy. We don't want a big deal.'

Nancy rolled her eyes at him.

'I know, Mike. It's tomorrow, there is any time for anything huge or fancy and I know El would never want anything like that anyways. But you have to do it right. We *are* going to do this right. For both of you. This is the only wedding you're going to have and you both deserve something wonderful and amazing after all these years waiting', she said, her voice trembling as the hard look melted off her face, chin wobbling as she fought back tears, knowing if she started that she'd never be able to stop. She was just so happy for them both and wanted everything to be perfect.

Mike's face softened as he saw the tears glistening in Nancy's eyes

and stepped forward to hug her, squeezing her tight.

'Thanks, Nance.'

Nancy smiled against his shoulder, sniffling and wiping her eyes before she stood upright, shifting into what Mike had always called her fighting stance, and clapped her hands.

'Okay, we need to get going. El needs a dress, you need a suit, Mike and, oh shit, you have to call Mom and let her know so she can get here in time!'

El's eyes opened wide, her heart beginning to race in her chest and nerves stirring to life in her stomach as she thought about meeting Mike's Mom.

Holy shit, she was going to meet Mike's Mom! How was she going to do this? She'd never meet anyone's parents before. What if she totally screwed this up? Or worse...what if she didn't like her? What she was going to do? Mike would be so upset...oh god!

Mike startled as he felt El's hand spasm on his, looking over to see her chewing on her thumbnail nervously, her eyes faraway and felt his eyes soften as he tightened his fingers around hers, squeezing gently until she looked at him, giving a tight, anxious smile.

Hey, my Mom couldn't be any scarier than this lot and I faced them somehow. No permanent scars or emotional damage anyways, he teased down the link, his face softening as she pressed her lips together, shoulders folding inward and lifted her hand to his mouth, kissing her knuckles, sending soothing feelings down the link as he felt his own stomach begin to churn, her worry and fear that strong. *Don't worry, El. She's going to love you.*

El nodded, taking a deep breath and then another till the nerves settled.
Mike turned back to Nancy as she waited patiently, obviously sensing El needed some reassurance, giving El a small smile before she raised her eyebrow at Mike as he crossed his arms over his chest.

'El is supposed to be taking it easy.'

Nancy rolled her eyes, giving an annoyed sigh.

'She's picking a dress, Mike, not bungee jumping. Jeez.'

Mike narrowed his eyes at her, opening his mouth to snap back but halted when Joyce walked over and laid a hand on his shoulder, distracting him as he turned to look at her expectantly.

Joyce only smiled and patted his shoulder reassuringly.

'I'll look after her, Mike. I swear, if she gets too tired I'll make sure she sits down and rests. We'll only be gone for a few hours.'

'And I'll be there for moral support', Max said, coming up to them and winking at El who gave a quick laugh, mouthing 'thank you' to her as she pretended to wipe a hand over her forehead in a ‘phew’ gesture. She'd definitely need Max to keep her sane in all this.

'Get a suit', Nancy said, pointing a warning finger at him as she began to walk away to go and get the keys, Joyce and Max following behind her to give them some privacy, 'I'm pretty sure there's a rental place in town.'

Mike shook his head, muttering a quiet 'bossy' under his breath that made El laugh loudly. She reached up and placed a hand on his cheek, caressing the soft hair that had begun to grow there since he hadn't had time to shave in the last few days.

'Is it still too late to elope?' she asked, raising an eyebrow at him, eyes bright with amusement.

Mike nodded, expression deliberately solemn, though he couldn't stop his lips from twitching upwards.

‘Afraid so.’

El sighed, pouting up at him.

'Damn it. You're lucky I love you, Mike Wheeler. I hate shopping and I'm pretty sure that I'm going to be forced to try on a zillion dresses now.'

'If you're not back in two hours, I promise I'll come and save you'.

El smiled up at him, her nose crinkling.

'Deal', she said, before rising up on her toes and pressed her lips against his gently.

Mike kissed her back, enthusiastically, his hand cupping the back of her head as they smiled against each other's lips, both beyond excited for what was to come, for when they'll finally be man and wife.

'Okay, time's a ticking', Nancy said, suddenly beside her shoulder, her hand tugging on her arm insistently. El pulled back, rolling her eyes at Mike who shook his head, giving Nancy an exasperated look that made her giggle, before letting herself be pulled away.

'El...' he called out just as they reached the doorway.

El halted, glancing over at him, deliberately ignoring Nancy as she shifted impatiently beside her, Max and Joyce already in the car, and looked at him expectantly, face soft.

'I love you too.'

El nodded, eyes brightening.

'I know', she said, her lip curling up into the half-smile he loved before she was pulled away by Nancy and disappeared around the corner, the front door slamming shut a few seconds later.

Mike stared into space as he grinned goofily after, his heart pounding as he thought about what they were about to do tomorrow and barely bit back a triumphant yell.

He was getting married tomorrow. El was going to be his wife. Never in his wildest dreams, his most thrilling imaginings of meeting and knowing the mysterious girl who was his soulmate, had ever imagined this day would ever truly happen.

A hand settled on Mike's shoulder and he jolted, so startled he almost jumped a foot into the air. He spun around, wide-eyed, and came to face to face with a grinning Dustin, Will and Lucas standing beside

him, trying not to listen in.

'Getting married, huh? About bloody time, dude.'

Mike laughed.

'She asked me, actually.'

'Oh, I know', Dustin said, laughing when Mike blinked at him, his lips pursed out as his eyebrows drew together, confused, 'if we had all waited for you to ask we could have been waiting another ten years.'

Mike snorted, elbowing him hard in the side, laughing when Dustin let out a loud 'ow.'

'Arse. Well...I guess we need to go and rent some suits before Nancy comes back and kills us.'

Dustin frowned, squinting at him.

'What? Why do I need a suit?'

'I'm not letting my best man look like a homeless person. What kind of best friend would that make me?'

Dustin's eyes sprung open wide, choking slightly on air as he breathed in too fast.

'Best man? Me? Are you freaking serious?'

Mike laughed, nodding at him.

'Of course you! Who else would it be? You're my best friend and you've been there for me through everything. So what do you say?'

Dustin let out a loud whoop and rushed up to tackle-hug Mike, almost knocking him to the ground. Mike let out a breathless laugh, all the air knocked out of him, and patted him on the back.

'Are you kidding? Hell yes!' Dustin said, as he pulled back, a wide grin creasing his face.

Will and Lucas walked up to him, both smiling happily.

'You're braver than me, man', Lucas said, shaking his head slowly but from the slow smile on his face Mike could tell he was thrilled for them.

'Oi,' Will said, nudging him with his shoulder with an amused look, before smiling at Mike, 'We really are happy for you both. Dustin's right. It's about damn time you both got to be happy.'

Mike grinned.

'Thanks, Will. Hey, you guys should come with us. I actually...' he said, rubbing at his neck awkwardly, shifting on his foot before taking a deep breath and continuing, 'I want to ask you both to stand up with me as well. I know El would love having you both up there with us and I think we might make a pretty good team. What do you say?'

Will and Lucas's eyes both widened in surprise, exchanging a quick look before they turned back to a nervous Mike.

'I'm in,' Lucas said, slapping Mike on the back with a wide grin.

'Me too', Will said, smiling brightly and nodding enthusiastically.

They all talked loudly, grinning widely and laughing as they headed down the stairs towards the car. They stopped near the bottom as Jonathan and Steve wandered in through the front door, frowning at the resigned looks on their faces.

'Hurry back, you four. Nancy left us a list of things to do get done before tomorrow', Jonathan said, waving a sheet of paper at them that was full to the brim with notes in Nancy's curly hand-writing.

Mike groaned, running a hand over his face with an annoyed huff.

'Of course she bloody did. Yep, definitely should have eloped', he muttered under his breath, causing the others to laugh as they walked out the front door, all turning to each other as they got out of ear-shot, unanimously agreeing to take their time coming back.

**

El gritted her teeth in frustration as she stared at the racks of endless white dresses, all of which was were all totally wrong. She had already tried on twenty dresses and hadn't found anything that she liked or that suited her. They were all too puffy or frilly or just...not right.

She didn't know what she was looking for, but she was starting to think she wasn't going to find it here.

El rubbed at her eyes, where a headache was beginning to pulse and throb, and pushed away from where she'd been riffling through the rack with an annoyed hair, resisting the urge to pull her hair.

Argh, why was this so damn hard?

Nancy came up behind El and gave her a reassuring smile, squeezing her shoulder gently.

'It's okay, El. We'll find something. It sometimes takes a while to find something you like. I remember how frustrated I was when I was looking for the wedding. It took me a whole three months to find something.'

El groaned, squeezing her eyes shut and tugged on the ends of her curls, before reaching up to rub at her temples.

'Yeah, I get that but Nancy, I don't have three months. I don't have twenty-four hours! Argh, now I remember why I bloody hate shopping.'

Nancy opened her mouth to speak, her blue eyes wide with worry when the shop attendant wandered over, holding up another frothy concoction with small bows all over the skirt in front of El, giving them a simpering smile.

'Oh, honey, this one is so you! I'm just sure of it, and it's high-necked so it will cover your...uh...unfortunate bruising', the blonde-haired woman said, eyeing El's neck distastefully.

El's teeth snapped together as she felt her fingers curl into fists, her expression darkening as she had the uncontrollable need to hit something...or better someone. She glared down at the monstrosity of

a dress and then up into the woman's eyes, seeing the pity and self-righteous gleaming there, as if she was marring some wife-beater.

How dare she think that about Mike...the little.... El thought, letting out a quiet growl as her frustration reached breaking point and the leash on her temper broke with a loud snap that was almost audible.

She took a slow step forward and then another, her eyes narrowed dangerously, and watched with petty satisfaction as the woman paled, taking a stumbling step back.

Max hurriedly jumped off from her seat on the pale pink couch and quickly tucked her arm into El's arm, yanking her to a halt before jerking her away from the attendant. She shook her head at the woman with a tight, forced smile.
'I'm pretty sure that's a no, sorry,' she said, before waving a hand at the table on the far wall where refreshments and food were laid out for shoppers and began to drag El there determinedly, 'We'll just get a drink and... take a breather before we take another look.'

The woman nodded quickly, taking the hint and rushed back behind her desk, eyeing them warily from the safety of it, fiddling with papers and rearranging things on it nervously.

Max let out a quiet laugh at the woman's terrified expression, amused, before she turned and looked at El who stood beside her, staring down at the table.

'Well...you've still got the touch, El. I'm kind of impressed. The woman seriously looked like she was going to pee herself.'

El gave a half-hearted shrug without looking up from where she was picking at the finger sandwich in front of her, pulling it into tiny pieces, her face sad and dejected, eyebrows drawn together into a small frown.

Max watched her for a long moment, her lips pursed thoughtfully before she spoke slowly, tone thoughtful.

'You know...I can totally go over and kick her if you want me to...you never know, it might make you feel better.'

El lifted startled eyes to Max's, staring at her for a few seconds before she burst out laughing, clutching her sides as she leant back against the shaky table breathlessly.

'Oh it would,' she finally managed to gasp out, wiping at her eyes, 'Did you see the way she was looking at my neck...I mean what a...'

'Bitch?' Max supplied, smirking and El laughed again, nodding.

'That's it. But as much as that would cheer me up, I'd kind of like you to be at my wedding and not in jail on charges of assault.'

Max sighed in disappointment, lips quirking up into a grin.

'There is that...but, come on, it would be totally worth it.'

'Probably,' El said, putting on a serious tone as their eyes met for a second before they burst into uncontrollable giggles, clinging to each other as they gasped breathlessly.

Their laughter petered off after a few minutes and El sighed as she sobered slightly, giving a heavy sigh as she leant her head against Max's shoulder.

'This sucks, Max. Why is it so hard? I mean, it's just a dress. A stupid white dress. There has to something, anything, in this damn store.'

Max looked down into El's miserable face, giving a sad smile as she wrapped her arm around her friend's shoulders and patted her arm comfortingly.

'Remind me to elope when Dustin eventually wears me down,' Max joked but gave a real shudder as she imagined having to try on all these awful dresses.

El laughed at the horrified look on her face and nodded in agreement.

'Oh I will, trust me. You don't want anything to do with this horror show. Come on,' El said, lifting her head off Max's shoulder and straightening, shoulders slumped, 'let's just go home. I'm sure I have something white I can wear in my closet somewhere...'

Max caught El's hand, tugging hard as she tried to walk away and pulled her to an abrupt halt. El let out a strangled screech as she tumbled forward, almost falling on her face as she reached out and caught herself seconds before her face hit in the floor.

She blew her hair out of her face and glared at Max over her shoulder as she rose to her feet, raising her eyebrows in a look that clearly said 'what the hell?'

Max put her hands on her hips, raising an eyebrow at her, expression stubborn as she shook her head at her.

'Uh-uh, El Hopper soon-to-be Wheeler. No way are we leaving now. We are not quitters. We are going to find you a dress if it takes us all damn day or drives us completely mad. Whatever comes first.'

'I'm pretty sure I'm already halfway there on the second one,' El grumbled, pouting slightly as she crossed her arms over her chest irritably, eyeing the exit with a hopeful eyes.

'El?' Joyce's voice suddenly came from behind them, soft and shaking with something that El thought sounded like...excitement?

El turned around, frowning, and found Joyce standing in front of her, another dress hanging over her arms, as she gave El a hopeful smile.

She huffed at the sight of it, barely resisting the urge to put her hands behind her back like a child, her face disgruntled.

Not another one, she groaned inwardly, running a hand through her hair as she eyed the dress distrustfully.

Joyce's looked at her face and let out a quiet chuckle at the stubborn look in her eyes that made her look like a two-year-old and smiled at her, holding the dress out.

'Trust me, honey, you're definitely going to like this one. Just try it on...for me', she added when El pressed her lips together, biting back a grin as El gave a sigh of defeat and reluctantly took it from her.

'Okay, but this is the late one. If I don't like this one...we're going home,' El said, staring at them all till they nodded in agreement,

hiding smiles at her tantrum.

El turned and practically stomped to the changing rooms, pulling the curtain closed behind her as she hung the dress on the hook inside without looking at it.

She pulled her jeans and shirt, throwing them into the corner and tugged the dress of its hook before carefully tugging it over her head, slipping her hands through the long sleeves and let it fall to her feet in a pool of pristine, white silk.

There was no mirror in the dressing room, and El sighed as she realised she'd have to go out there again and listen to the attendant's fake oohs and ahhs and see everyone's faces fall again as they saw it was another dead-end.

If this one looks like crap, then she'd just walk down the aisle in jeans and a t-shirt. Mike wouldn't care either way. He'd still think she looked beautiful, El thought, smiling fondly before slumping and quickly straightening the dress before she stepped out to where everyone was waiting patiently, holding her arms stiffly beside her to keep them from crossing them over her chest defensively.

She faltered as she saw Nancy and Max's eyes suddenly widen, their mouth's falling open as they stared at her, utterly speechless. She frowned at them for a second, genuinely confused before her eyes turned to Joyce, her eyes own eyes widening, startled, as she saw the look on her face. She had jumped to her feet, her eyes slowly filling with tears that trickled down her cheeks as she pressed her hands to her mouth, her lips trembling.

'Oh, El', she sighed, before bursting into tears, turning away as she sobbed quietly, so full of joy she couldn't contain it. Her baby looked so pretty...no, so beautiful.

'Wow...I mean...just wow, El,' Nancy gasped, clapping her hands excitedly as she jumped to her feet, bouncing in spot as she looked at her, 'you look like a princess. Mike is going to lose his mind when he sees you.'

When El sent Nancy a doubtful look, certain they were putting it on

so she'd leave with a dress, Max nodded as well, a wide grin spreading across her face as she raised her fingers to her mouth and whistled loudly at her.

'No, El, Nancy's totally right. You look gorgeous. Turn around and have a look.'

Her heart racing in her chest, suddenly unbelievably nervous, El took a deep breath and turned to face the mirror. Her hands fell limply to her sides as she stared at her reflection, her eyes going wide as her breath hitched in her chest before shuddering out of her, unable to believe what she was seeing.

'Oh...oh my god!' she breathed, her throat tightening as her tears suddenly filled with tears, her chin wobbling precariously as she hurriedly blinked the tears back to clear her vision.

She couldn't believe that it was truly her in the mirror staring back at her, that she was the dark, curly-haired beauty in the fall of white silk that fluttered around, the fit perfect, as if it was made just for her. Like it had been waiting for her.

She looked like someone out of a fairy-tale, delicate, tiny and graceful. She looked like a fairy or a princess, like Nancy had said. She looked beautiful, something she had only ever truly believed and felt when Mike looked at her.

El felt the tears brimming in her eyes for a second before they spilled down her cheeks and she reached up brush them away with a wet laugh. She lowered her trembling hands, her breath catching as she ran them over the front of the dress, admiring the beauty of it.

It was the softest thing she had ever touched, dipping in at her waist and skimming down over her tiny curves, highlighting them perfectly. It was the prettiest thing she had worn. It was perfect.

She felt hand's settle on her shoulders lightly and watched in the mirror as Joyce's head appeared beside hers, a bright smile curving her lips, despite her red-rimmed eyes and wet cheeks.

'This is the one. It's yours. I could tell the second I saw it', she told

her softly, kissing El's curls gently as she squeezed her shoulders, 'You look beautiful, sweetheart.'

El's lips trembled even as they spread into a brilliant smile, happiness and excitement bubbling up inside her and spreading through her entire body, taking up every space until she was sure she would burst with it.

Yes, she thought, smiling at herself in the mirror, this is definitely the one.

**

Mike glanced over in the direction of the en-suite bathroom, a wide smile creasing his face as he chuckled quietly as he heard El singing loudly over the sound of the shower, her voice happy and relaxed.

She had come home from shopping practically glowing, bouncing around the room with excitement and had practically jumped him when he'd come in from working in the garden with the boys, kissing him enthusiastically and toppling him back onto the bed where'd they gotten lost for almost an hour. They had kept their deal though and only kissed, running their hands over each other over their clothes until they'd both been breathless and hungry, and El had skipped off to the shower, with an invitation to join over her shoulder with an impish grin that had made him groan, and be thankful for his self-control, which was even cursing him in that moment.

Mike shook his head, bringing his mind back to the task at hand and sat down on the bed, lifting the phone that sat on the bedside table and dialled the familiar number, holding the phone up to his ear with a nervous shifting of his legs, taking a deep breath.

It rang for a few seconds before there was quiet click and a familiar voice came through, soft and questioning.

'Hello.'

He swallowed hard, squeezing his eyes shut as he fought back the nerves that stirred to life inside his stomach, before speaking.

'Hey Mom'.

He heard his Mom, Karen Wheeler, gasp on the other side, her voice hushing for a second before she began to speak rapidly, voice frantic and worried.

'Mike? Oh thank god… Where have you been? I've been calling the apartment for days and no-one has been picking up. Where are you? Are you okay? What's going on?'

Mike bit his lip to keep from laughing, knowing his Mom wouldn't appreciate it in her panicked state, and shook his head.

'Mom, I'm fine, I swear. Dustin and I just had to help a friend with something and we stayed at their family's house for a couple of days. Everything's okay.'

Karen took a deep breath, relief in the very sound.

'Okay then. Please don't do that to me again, honey. You scared me half to death,' she said with a weak chuckle and Mike could almost see her straightening her Farrah Fawcett hair-cut as she tried to compose herself.

'I won't, I swear,' Mike said, chuckling slightly as he lay back on the bed, before he closed his eyes, 'Mom...could you do something for me?'

Karen stilled on the other hand, her heart clenching as she heard something in his voice that gave her pause. Something new and warm and exciting and hopeful. Something she had never heard before. His voice almost shook with it, as it he could barely contain it.

'Of course. Anything, Mike, you know that', she said, her voice soft even as she held her breath, feeling like something huge was about to happen.

'Could you and Holly come up to my friend's house tonight? There's someone I want you to meet.'

There was a quiet pause for a long moment before Karen's spoke

again, her voice trembling slightly.

'Who?'

Mike grinned, throwing his head back against the pillow as he clutched the phone tighter in his hands, his smile so wide his cheeks began to ache from it.

'It's her, Mom. I found her.'

Karen gasped, her breath hitching before Mike heard the phone hit the floor and let out an uncontrollable, exhilarated laugh, picturing perfectly the shocked look on her face. The sounds of her scrambling for it and muffled cursing came through the speaker before he could hear her breathing again as she gasped out only three words.

'Oh my god!'

Notes for the Chapter:

> So what did everyone think? As always I can't wait to read your reviews!!! I promise I'll update as soon as physically possible- Katie xoxo

18. Chapter 18

Notes for the Chapter:

> Hey everyone!!! OMG, I can't believe this is the end! I'm getting teary-eyed just writing it. Arghh....thank you all for all you're support and amazing reviews throughout the story. You have no idea how much I love you all for it. I'm going to miss you so much! If anyone wants to talk on Tumblr just add me on tumblr, I'd love to hear from anyone :D https://www.tumblr.com/blog/strangers-love

El peered into the mirror, her heart pounding in her chest as butterflies fluttered to life in her stomach, her hands shaking even as a wide smile curved her lips.

She couldn't still believe it was herself in the mirror, that she was the beautiful girl who seemed to glow with happiness, the lace and silk dress she'd stepped into only minutes before literally taking her breath away, making her feel like a princess. She lifted a trembling hand to a stray curl, tucking it behind her ear as everything inside her seemed to quiver and buzz with anticipation and joy.

This is it. I'm getting married today, she thought, giddiness bubbling inside her as she let out a giggle she just couldn't hold back.
She spun in a circle that left her dizzy, the skirt of her dress fluttering around her feet as she came to a halt before jumping up and down in excitement. In less than an hour they'd be husband and wife.

It didn't feel real...like it was the most wonderful dream that you never wanted to wake from, something she had imagined as a little girl locked away in the labs. A day where she would be safe and happy and loved by a man that was kind and sweet and handsome. A day she had never truly believed would happen. Or even truly existed in the world. But it did exist, and it was better than anything she could have ever imagined, because it was real, and it was perfect, and it was Mike. Mike who was the sweetest, kindest, most selfless and joyful person she knew, and who held the most beautiful, purest soul she'd ever encountered.

No...she never could have imagined someone as incredible as Mike. And even if they weren't soul mates, she knew she'd still choose him. He was everything to her. There was no-one in the world who meant more, or could ever possibly mean more, than him. Mike was the one for her...and would always be. No matter what life threw at them, she knew they would face it together. Always.

She was alone for the first time in hours, Joyce and Karen having been lead away only minutes before by Nancy as they had both sobbed uncontrollably. Nancy had rolled her eyes at El, her expression amused as she patted both their arms, murmuring soothing words as she tried to calm them down, giving El a minute alone that she had been longing for all morning.

She hadn't seen Mike since earlier that day, and her entire body was almost aching to go and find him, the need so much worse since she had placed a veil over the block so he couldn't peek at her in her dress, wanting him to be surprised. But the loss of contact...of being separated from him even only a little bit was making her restless, wanting time to go faster so she could finally see him.

Nancy, Joyce and Max had tried to separate them even earlier than they eventually were, sneaking into their room at the crack of dawn to try and kidnap her, all of them practically vibrating with excitement as they had shaken her awake.

She opened a bleary eye and frowned irritably at their excited faces, groaning, and rolling over, ingoring them with a mumbled, whining noise.

'Ugh...go away!' she muttered as she shoved her face back into the pillow, yanking her arm away as she felt someone tugging on it insistently, the movement shaking her entire body.

'Come on, El, up you get. We have to get started or you'll never be ready in time,' Nancy said, her voice eager but underlined with a steely resolve, positive she was going to get her way.

El shook her head, clenching her jaw as, without opening her eyes, she lifted one hand off the bed and flicked it towards them, her powers stirring to life inside her. She bit back a laugh as she heard all

three of them gasp, startled, as they floated across the room and out the door, the door slamming firmly behind them and locking with a decisive click.

'Seriously, El', Nancy growled through the door, banging on the door on the other side before crossing her arms over her chest with a muttered curse. Joyce bit back an amused smile, pressing a hand to her mouth as Max cackled beisde her, clutching her sides.

'I told you she'd do something like that', she said through her tears, wiping at her cheeks as she shook her head.

El's lips twisted into a smug smile as she listened to Nancy bang uselessly on the door, snuggling deeper under the warm covers. Her smile softened, her entire body melting against Mike's as she felt him shift behind her, his arm wrapping around her waist to tug her in closer as he let out a sleepy laugh.

Mike lifted his head, watching as El's eyes opened and she smiled at him sleepily, leaning down to press a soft kiss to her jaw.

'That's my girl,' he said, snuggling back in beside as they both drifted back off to sleep.

She had finally, reluctantly, left Mike's side and their warm bed at the more humane hour of nine, knowing she wouldn't be able to hold the three of them off forever, and had left Mike with a whispered promise to see each other later and a sweet kiss that had left her lips tingling and her heart racing, excited for what was to come in only a few hours.

El shook her head, drawing her focus back, as she carefully ran her finger over the tight, lacy sleeves of her dress, giving a quick sigh of relief as she felt the ring she had tucked inside still sitting within, snug and safe.

She studied herself in the mirror, her lips curving up into a small smile as she took in the magic that Nancy and Joyce had performed on her, her cheeks now flushed and rosy with blush, her eyelids sparkling with gold shadow that somehow made her eyes look brighter and larger, her lashes thick and dark, and her lips painted a

pretty light pink, while her neck was pale and unmarred, the bruising beneath hidden by foundation.

Her eyes lowered to her neck and she lifted her hand to touch the tiny gold flower pendant that sat in the hollow of her throat, her eyes filling with tears as she remembered the moment Karen Wheeler, Mike's mother, had taken her aside earlier that morning and given her the wedding gift, a necklace she had worn on her own wedding day, and her mother as well before her. A gift that had truly made her feel welcomed into the Wheeler family.

El shook her head, laughing quietly as she remembered how terrified she had been to meet Karen Wheeler, the fear that she had quickly learned was completely unnecessary....

El swallowed hard as she stared at the door in front of her, twisting her fingers in front of her anxiously, wanting nothing more than to run far, far away. Everyone else had left, deserting her to this torment, claiming they wanted to give them privacy.

Traitors. Deserters, El thought petulantly, taking a deep shuddering breath as she tried to calm her racing heart that was beating so hard she was afraid it burst out of her chest.

You can do this, you can do this. She's just a woman. She can't be that scary, she thought, trying to convince herself even as she lifted a shaking hand to knock on the door, flinching, her throat tightening, as she heard Mike call out a loud, 'Come in.'

She pushed the door open and stepped into the room slowly, freezing in the doorway as panic and fear shot through her, turning every muscle rigid, as Mike and the dark-haired woman beside him both turned to look at her.

Her eyes snapped to Mike's, keeping her face purposely blank, even as she silently begged him through the link to come to her, to help her survive this. Mike beamed at her, hiding his worry at the panic he could feel shooting down the bond, his eyes warm and comforting as he quickly walked over to her, taking her cold and limp hand in his as he pressed a kiss to her temple, his entire body vibrating with pride and eagerness.

'Mom, this is my El, the girl I've been telling you about. El, this is my Mom, Karen Wheeler,' he said, wrapping an arm around El's waist as he felt her begin to tremble, tracing comforting patterns on the skin bared by her shirt, sending reassuring feelings down the link as he felt his own throat tightening with panic, echoing her own.

El grabbed Mike's arm, her fingers spasming on his sleeve as her eyes met his Mother's who watched her curiously, her dark eyes squinting slightly, feeling like she was being pinned in place, unable to move a single muscle. Her lungs burned, screaming for air as her chest tightened painfully, constricting them uncomfortably. Now she knew what Mike must have felt like meeting her family, like she was under a microscope, being examined and judged, and worrying you'll completely flunk the test you didn't even realise you were going to take.

Shit, shit, shit, she thought, her panic and anxiety rising until she thought she was going to be sick, her stomach clenching as bile began to rise in her throat.

I can't do this...

Breathe, El...it's going to be fine. I promise*, Mike whispered down the link, squeezing her waist gently as he bit back an amused grin, finding her worry adorable. He already knew his Mom was going to love El, no matter what.*

El felt his amusement filter down the link and felt her panic fade slightly as irritation replaced it, and she turned her head to glare up at him, elbowing him hard in the side, her lip twitching up as he winced, holding back a pained moan.

Serves him right!

Her panic returned as he began to pull her over to his Mom, Mike's lip curling into a crooked grin as she dragged her feet slightly, reluctance in every step, until she stood in front of her.

El swallowed hard as she looked up into Karen's face, her throat tightening painfully as her hands began to shake uncontrollably, desperately hoping she didn't notice. Her entire body shook with nerves and anxiety that twisted her insides, making them roll nauseatingly.

Karen Wheeler was a beautiful woman, her light brown hair elegantly styled without a single hair out of place, her make-up perfectly done, dressed in a pretty light blue dress without a single crease. She was cool and composed as she looked El up and down, everything El was definitely not. Her eyes dropped to the bruises circling El's neck and El had to resist the urge to squirm on the spot, her fingers clutching at the denim of her jeans to stop herself from covering them with her hand.

She took a deep breath, squeezing Mike's arm under her hand before she held it out in front of her, her palm feeling sweatier than what seemed humanely possible.

'It's nice to meet you, Mrs. Wheeler', she said, her voice croaking slightly, throat so dry it felt like a layer of dust was coating it, as she bit her lip, shifting from foot to foot as she barely resisted the urge to bolt from the room, her shoulders curving inwards in a sudden bout of horrible self-consciousness.

Karen watched her for what felt like the longest seconds of El's life before her face softened, her dark eyes warming as she gave a wide smile that lit up her face. She abruptly stepped forward, ignoring El's out-stretched hand and instead pulled her into her arms, wrapping her arms around her shoulders.

El let out a surprised squeak, stiffening for a second before she relaxed slightly, lifting arms that felt like lead and hugged her back.

'It's nice to finally meet you, El. Mike....he told what you went through. Thank for you protecting him. Thank you for coming back to my son.'

El's lips trembled as she let out a quiet sob, melting into the embrace as she squeezed her eyes shut to hold back the hot tears that filled her eyes.

Karen's arms tightened around her, lifting her face to smile at her son as he watched them quietly, his own chin wobbling as tears burned behind his eyes, a soft smile creasing his cheeks.

'Welcome to the family, El', Karen whispered to her as El cuddled in closer, all the worry and tension she had been holding inside about meeting Mike's Mom melting away completely...

A knock on the door made El's head snap up, a welcoming smile stretching across her face as Max popped her head inside, a wide grin lighting up her face.

'Hey, El, what did you do to the parentals? I just passed them and they're hysterical...' Max's amused voice trailed off as she stared at her, her eyes popping wide as her mouth fell open in surprise.

The shock quickly fell away as she grinned at her, slipping into the room and closing the door behind her.

'El, you look gorgeous!' she said, excitement shaking her voice, before her expression morphed into a speculative look, cocking her head to the side. 'Hm...maybe I should reconsider this whole marriage thing if I get to look this damn good!'

El laughed, shaking her head at her and giving her a playful shove.

'Stop.'

Max laughed back, keeping one arm tucked behind carefully behind her back, her expression growing serious as she studied El as she straightened her necklace, her face alit with joy.

'Are you happy?' she asked, voice soft and questioning.

El's eyes shifted from the mirror and smiled at Max, nodding quickly.

'Ridiculously. I'm also a bit nervous,' she said, laughing sheepishly as she pressed a hand to her stomach which was still fluttering wildly.

Max shook her head, taking her hand with her free one and squeezed it.

'Don't be. The way you two look at each other...the way you love each other...you're going to be happy for the rest of your lives...I can feel it'.

El's face crumpled at her words, blinking back the tears that burned at the back of her eyes, before yanking her forward into a tight hug.

'Thank you', she whispered, sniffling, her voice thick with unshed

tears.

Max hugged her back just as tight, laying her head on her shoulder as tears of her own pricked her eyes before she snifffed, shaking her head as she pulled back and quickly dashed away the tears that had managed to escape with a forced scowl, slightly embarrassed by her show of emotion.

'Nope....none of that mushy stuff', she said firmly, making El laugh quickly before she nodded, determinedly blinking back the remaining tears and smiled at her.

'I have something for you,' Max said, quickly pulling her hand from behind her back and shoving the bundle into El's hand, her cheeks flushing at the cheesiness of the moment.

El blinked down at the flower crown in her hand, her mouth tilting up into a wide smile, as she ran her fingers over the silky soft petals of the white and pink flowers and then down the trailing white ribbon on the back of it, stunned.

'Max, they're so pretty', she said, spinning towards the mirror and placing it carefully on top of her head, the ring of flowers suiting her hairstyle perfectly, as if it had waiting for the crown to complete it.

Max's blush deepened as she shrugged jerkily.

'You know me...full of hidden talents', she said, laughing awkwardly as El turned back towards her, opening her mouth to speak, until a knock at the door interrupted and Hopper poked his head inside.

They both laughed at his confused expression, clearly not expecting to see Max, before she turned to El, leaning forward to kiss her cheek unexpectedly.

'That's my queue. Good luck, El!', she said, turning and skipping to the door, patting Hopper on the head as she passed him with a grin, 'See you down there, Hop.'

Hopper watched her leave, expression amused as he shook his head before his eyes shifted to El and he stilled, his face going slack with shock and surprise as he took her in. His usually straight-lipped smile

exploded into one wider than she'd ever seen, his eyes crinkling as he looked her up and down, before filling with tears.

'Oh El...you look....' he trailed off, words failing him, and El nodded, understanding what he couldn't say aloud, walking forward to take his larger hand in her smaller one. Neither of them needed words in that moment, they never had, understanding every thought and feeling that went unspoken.

'You ready, kiddo?' he asked, opening the door wider as he held out his arm for her, sweeping into a dramatic.

El laughed, nodding her head eagerly as she walked over and linked her arm with his, an excited smile creasing her cheeks.

'Let's do it', she said, as they walked out the door and down the hall towards the back door and to the groom she knew who would be waiting for her nervously. Towards her future.

**

Mike fidgeted at the end of the aisle as he stood under the archway strung with fairy lights that twinkled almost mockingly cheerfully at him in the dusky night air, their light getting brighter as the sun began to set in the distance.

A knot of nervousness tightened in his chest, impatience and nerves warring inside him as he shifted from foot to foot, face growing paler with every second that passed.

Where were they? What was taking so long? he wondered, twisting his tie anxiously before he ran a hand over his hair. He stilled, groaning, when he felt how short it was, Nancy and his Mom having forced him into a chair and brutally hacked away at it earlier that morning. It left him feeling exposed, with nothing to hide behind with everyone's eyes on him, and he couldn't stop himself from shooting Nancy a dirty look, narrowing his eyes at hers.

He gave an annoyed huff, barely resisting the urge to cross his arms over his chest like a two year old, when she didn't even notice his glare, too busy comforting Karen, who had been crying all morning

since she'd seen him in his suit and sobbed about 'her baby looking so grown up.' He needed a distraction from the anxiety churning away in his stomach, causing nausea to rise up inside his throat, almost choking him, unable to get rid of the niggling insecurities slipping into his mind.

What if she'd changed her mind? What if she was freaking out and he didn't know it? he thought, his face blanching and stomach clenching as the image of her hyperventilating, pale and afraid in her room slipped into his mind and settled there, causing a wave of helplessness to rush into him.

It didn't help that El had been holding a veil over the bond the entire morning, keeping him from peeking at her in her wedding dress. Come on, he'd only tried the once! He'd never regretted anything more, knowing that if he hadn't he'd at least know she was okay and could calm the anxiousness churning his insides.

Seriously, Wheeler? You're being stupid, he inwardly chastised himself, shaking his head slightly. Of course she wouldn't change her mind. She asked you, you idiot!

Mike jolted, letting out a startled squeak, when a large hand settled on his shoulder, squeezing hard. He spun around and stared at Dustin who was watching him with a worried expression, his eyebrows raised, and mouth hanging open slightly.

'Whoa, dude, you're really white. I mean, whiter than normal. You okay?'
Mike shook his head, his breath coming out in unnatural puffs that made Dustin's eyes widen even more and pat him on the back.

'Um...okay... deep breaths, dude. Everything's going to be fine. Just breathe.' he said, rubbing his back in soothing circles, steadying and grounding him, 'That's good, man. In and out, just like that.'

Mike squeezed his eyes shut before spinning around to lean against the archway strung with lights and sweetly perfumed and brightly coloured flowers, pressing his forehead to the cool metal, and praying that their families couldn't tell how much he was freaking out that she was late.

He took a deep shuddering breath, and then another, until he felt his racing heart begin to calm. He sighed, his shoulders, which had stiffened during his panic attack, loosening as he straightened and turned back to Dustin, giving him a weak smile.

'Thanks, Dustin.'

Dustin gave a relieved smile and nodded, patting him on the shoulder.

'All good, Mike. All part of the Dustin Henderson best man package,' he said, winking dramatically, making Mike chuckle weakly.

Lucas leant past the two of them, cocking an eyebrow at Mike, his lip twisting up into an amused smirk.

'You right, man?

Mike nodded quickly, the very movement jerky and unsure.

Lucas snorted out at a laugh at the unconvincing gesture, watching the way his face was growing steadily greener.

'Yeah you look it. Five bucks say he barfs before El even makes it down the aisle', he said to Will in an over-loud whisper.

Mike groaned at the word barf, swallowing back the panicked bile rising inside his throat, throwing his back to stare up at the sky.

Will rolled his eyes at Lucas, elbowing him hard in the ribs with a shake of his head and a muttered, 'idiot', as Lucas let out a pained groan and gave him a confused, hurt look, before he walked over to stand beside Mike, rubbing his back, having heard his panicked thoughts loud and clear.

'Don't worry, Mike. Nothing's going to go wrong. Girl's always take a long time getting ready for their weddings...I mean, I think they do. I'm sure she'll be here soon. Trust me, El's never been more excited about anything in her entire life...and just wait till you see her, man, she looks amazing...'

The nerves churning inside Mike's stomach faded slightly at Will's

words, knowing deep inside he could trust them. If anyone knew what El was feeling in that moment it was Will and, even after only knowing him for a few days, he knew he wouldn't lie to him.

He nodded at him, his relieved expression morphing into a dreamy one, as his lips curled up into a crooked, goofy smile at the thought of seeing her in her wedding dress any second now.

'I bet she looks beautiful', he said, his eyes going soft.

Dustin glanced behind him and grinned, before elbowing Mike in the side.

'Well...if you turn around right now I can guarantee you'll find out.'

Mike's blinked at him for a second, his eyebrows curving into a confused frown before he stilled, his eyes going wide as his breath began to speed up. He spun around quickly as the first strains of music filled the air, his heart racing in his chest and froze in place.

Oh my god!

Everything seemed to stop in that moment, fading into the background until all he could hear was his heart beating loudly in his ears and all he could see was the beautiful vision walking towards him. Until there was nothing and no-one but him and her.

Mike stared at El as she moved down the petal-strewn aisle, his breath catching in his chest, unable to hold back the wide grin that spread across his cheeks.

She was almost glowing with happiness as she seemed to float towards him, his favourite shy half-smile curving her pink lips as her eyes met his, the honey-brown of them shining as if lit from within.

She looked like she had stepped out a fairy tale, her dress something a princess or fairy queen would wear to the ball to meet her prince charming. Except this time, he was the lucky prince charming. It fell to her feet in the most delicate snow white silk and lace that was layered atop each other, gliding over her tiny curves and highlighting them to perfection. It skimmed and dipped over her collarbone and down her arms into tight sleeves that covered her delicate arms, one

which was tucked into Hopper's as he led her down the aisle.

Mike's face softened as she grinned at him, a warmth rushing into his stomach, feeling like he was going to burst as it filled him to brimming, unable to believe this much happiness could be possible. His smile only widened as he realised the excitement trickling into his veins and thrumming thorough him was hers as well as his, the link now again wide open and alive once again.

El walked slowly towards the petal strewn aisle, her eyes wide and fascinated, as she looked around everywhere, unable to believe the transformation that had taken place around her. It was so pretty, she thought, her mouth gaping open slightly, as her head swivelled from side to side, trying to take everything in. The garden glowed with hundreds and hundreds of white, twinkling lights that shone in the dusky light, flowers of all colours and scents tied onto the chairs beside the aisle, and around the archway at the end.

She smiled as both their families turned to look at her, Joyce, Nancy, Karen and Max beaming at her, while little Holly watched with wide-eyes and a gaping mouth as she walked towards them, whispering loudly to her Mother that 'Mike was marrying a princess!', making El giggle as Hopper looked on proudly. Jonathan grinned while Steve winked at her beside him, giving her a thumbs up. El's eyes slid to Will, Lucas and Dustin, seeing them grinning at her out of the corner of her eyes, and gave them a wide smile, happy that all her boys were up their with them.

But where was Mike?

Her eyes shifted downwards as she stepped onto the pale white sheet between the seats that made up the aisle and felt her breath catch in her throat, her heart skipping a beat as her eyes locked with Mike's dark ones where he stood at the very end of it.

Oh wow, she thought, her throat tightening with unshed tears of joy as she stared at him, her lip curving into a wobbly half-smile.

The words slipped down the link and El grinned as she saw his cheeks grow bright red, warmth filling her chest as she felt his mental fingers brushing against her mind in a gentle caress that brought

even more tears to her eyes, the smile stretching his cheeks not faltering once.

He looked so handsome in his suit, like a prince from a fairy tale or a undercover superhero from one of his comic books, his hair now cropped close to his forehead and neck, somehow curling even more wildly than before. But it was his eyes she couldn't look away from, bright and warm on hers as he grinned at her. And the look in them... he looked at her like she was the most beautiful creature in the entire world. Like he was the luckiest man in the world. A look she knew was mirrored on her own face.

Because she *knew* she was the luckiest girl in the world. She was about to marry her best friend, the most wonderful, sweetest, kindest, most selfless, and loving person she had ever met. She had never been more sure of anything in her entire life and knew she would never let him go again. Not for anything or anyone. He was hers and she was his, and she couldn't wait for the entire world would to know just how lucky she was.

She clutched at Hopper's arm, her fingers tightening on his as she tried, and failed, to keep her pace slow, wanting nothing more than to bolt down the aisle to Mike, her body vibrating with impatience, her insides jittery and shaking with excitement and anticipation.

El barely felt Hopper's lips press against her cheek or his good-natured chuckle as they finally reached the end of the aisle, everything else fading away until all there was was Mike and her. Nothing else existed in that moment as her hands eagerly reached for his as she moved to stand beside him, her heart pounding in her chest as tilted her head up to look into his face.

His hands were slick with sweat against her own dry palms but she only held on tighter, smiling up at him.

'Hi', she whispered.

'Hi', Mike said, his eyes softening as he reached to tuck a loose curl that had escaped behind her ear, before leaning down and brushing his lips against her ear, his voice soft and low as he whispered to her, the words and the moment just for them, 'You look beautiful.'

El's lips trembled even as she beamed at him, tears gleaming in her eyes and one spilling down her cheek as she reached up to settle her hand on his neck, her fingers curling into the much shorter ends of it, her thumb caressing his now bare neck.

'You cut your hair', she said, her voice catching slightly, thick with unshed tears of joy.

Mike shivered at her touch, narrowing his eyes at her playfully as she giggled, knowing what she was doing to him, before he shrugged, the gesture jerky and awkward.

'Yeah, Nancy and Mom made me do it', he said, turning and shooting his sister a slight glare that made her laugh, shaking her head at him from her seat in the front aisle. He hated his hair short.

El studied the new look silently for a long moment, before she smiled brightly, reaching out to brush the somehow wilder curls back from his forehead, cupping his cheek in her hand as she caressed his jaw with her thumb.

'I like it'.

Okay, maybe I could learn to like it, he thought, grinning as she smiled at him, her eyes gleaming with more happiness than he'd would've thought possible if he wasn't feeling it fill every space inside him, knowing it was shining in his own eyes as well.

The celebrant stepped forward then with a kind smile, his warm blue eyes observing them silently as he took his spot in front of them. He had seen and married many couples, soul mates and not, over the years and he knew in that moment that he had never seen two people more in love than the two before him. It was clear to him that they truly belonged together. He gave a happy nod, certain in a way he often wasn't when marrying couples, before he opened his notes, smiling at the two of them.

'Are you ready?'

El lifted her eyes to Mike's and returned his wide, excited smile as they both nodded at each other, his hands curling around her smaller

ones and squeezing tight.

'We're ready,' she said to the celebrant as Mike nodded beside her rapidly, grinning eagerly.

The minister smiled, before lowering his eyes to the speech in his hands and began to speak, his voice soft and melodious as it drifted over the suddenly hushed crowd.

Mike and El, however, barely heard a word he said, their eyes only for each other as they smiled sweetly, feeling their pulses racing against the others wrists, giggling quietly at the excited, frantic beat of it. They were so lost in each other they didn't hear the celebrant call for vows to be spoken until Mike was nudged in the side by Dustin so hard he stumbled forward, his eyes going wide and confused as he looked around dazedly.

'Oh right,' he said sheepishly, heat rushing into his cheeks as he bite his lip, letting out an embarrassed laugh as their families laughed behind them and the celebrant let out a small amused chuckle.

El blinked, dazed, as he jolted forward, her lip twitching before she giggled, her own cheeks flushing with embarrassment as her eyes met Mike's, expressions equally sheepish.

As the laughter petered out Mike lifted his face to hers, his expression suddenly so sure and eyes steady on hers, El's breath caught in her throat, her chest tightening and her hands beginning to shake as he began to speak.

'El....I have loved you since I was a kid, since before I even truly knew what love was. From the first moment I heard your voice in my head...I knew what it meant, who you were to me, and I fell a little in love. That love only grew stronger and stronger every time we spoke, as I realised how kind and sweet, curious and selfless you were. But it took losing you to truly realise how much I really loved you. And when we finally met again, I couldn't help but fall in love with you all over again, even when I fought against it. It was the strongest thing I've ever felt'.

'When we met again, when I saw you in the kitchen dancing to Bruce

Springsteen and singing like an angel,' he said, smiling when she blushed, pressing a hand to her cheek and laughing with slight embarrassment, 'I was just beginning to lose hope. I never thought I'd truly find you....I was sure that I'd spend me whole life looking for you. And then suddenly there you were. And I couldn't help but fall in love with you, even when I didn't know who you really were, even as I fought against it.'

'When I found out who you were, it was the happiest moment of my life. I never thought I would feel any happier than I did in that moment. But I was wrong...because that feeling is nothing compared to how happy I feel right now, standing beside you, joining our lives together.'

Mike smiled, his chin wobbling and tears filling his eyes as he let go of her hand to reach into his pocket and pulled out the tiny gold ring that sat inside. He took her hand in his shaking one and pressed it to the tip of her fourth finger on her left hand, his dark eyes on hers, gleaming with unshed tears and bright with happiness as he saw her own eyes brimming with tears, her chin wobbling as she looked up at him.

'Promises. They were always important to us. So with this ring...' he said, slipping the ring onto her finger until it settled near her knuckle, caressing it lovingly for a second before he lifted it to his lips, pressing a soft kiss to the cool metal, his eyes never leaving hers, 'I promise to always protect you, to be by your side through everything life throws at us, no matter what, and to spend the rest of my life loving you'.

El stared down at it, suddenly breathless, the image blurring as tears filled her eyes as she saw the single word engraved on the gold band. Promise. The word that had meant so much to them as children and now had come to mean so much more than they ever could have imagined.

She lifted her eyes to his as tears down fell down her cheeks, and gave a watery smile as she mouthed, 'I love you', sniffling quietly.

'I love you too', Mike mouthed back with a grin, reaching out to wipe at her wet cheeks with gentle fingers.

El let out a sheepish laugh, brushing away the tears that had begun to spill down his own cheeks before she took a deep breath and looked up at him with a trembling smile.

'Mike...I was so afraid for a long time. Lost and broken and alone in a world I didn't truly feel like I belonged in. I never thought it would get better...that I would be able to put the pieces of the old me together again but you...you brought me back, Mike. You put together all my broken pieces and brought me back to life. From the moment I met you you gave me hope, even when I didn't understand why. All I knew was that I wasn't afraid anymore. Because somehow...deep inside... I knew I was safe and where I belonged from the second our eyes met. I found my home in you. You showed me how beautiful and fun and wonderful the world could be again.'

'Even before we met, your voice was the only light in the darkness, the only thing that kept me going through everything, all the horror and the pain, and made keep believing in something better existing. You were my something better. You were everything to me then, and have somehow come to mean so much more...' she trailed off for a few seconds, the words catching in her throat where a lump quickly formed as she watched his chin wobble, his expression adoring as his fingers tightened on hers at her words.

A sob escaped her as she slipped one hand free and reached inside her sleeve where she had tucked the larger band that she'd hidden there earlier and looked up at him, giving a brilliant smile as she took his left hand in her shaking ones, holding the ring above his fourth finger.

'I know my life would never be fully complete without you in it. You are the greatest thing that ever happened to me and I will be eternally grateful for whatever fates gave you to me. I love you, Mike and I promise to love you for the rest for my life. You once told me your vision for our future, for our lives together, and I've never wanted anything more than what you described. I can't wait to have that, and so much more, with you starting today. And to spend the rest of my life with you by my side', she said, sliding the ring onto his finger with a soft sob.

Mike's heart raced in his chest, swallowing past the sudden tightness

in his throat, as he felt the cool metal stop at the base on his finger, a feeling of rightness settling deep inside him. It was like something had been missing, something he hadn't realised wasn't there but he missed terribly, and now he'd finally found it. Finally found her.

The celebrant smiled.

'Well then...by the power invested in me by the state of Indiana I now pronounce you husband wife. You may kiss the bride'.

Mike's face erupted into a huge grin as El let out an excited squeal, throwing herself into his arms as she wrapped her arms around his neck. He burst out laughing before lifting her into the air until her feet hovered over the ground and pressing his lips to hers in a enthusiastic kiss, his fingers tangling into her curls as he felt her lips curving against his.

They didn't see Jonathan step forward and point his camera at them, taking the photo that would sit on the bed-side table in their bedroom in the apartment, and then above the fireplace of the house that would be their forever home, the place they would grow old together and where they would raise their two wonderful children, back in Mike's hometown of Hawkin's. The photo that captured their joy in that moment, laughing and smiling as they kissed, El's arms wrapped around his neck and his hands curling on her back.

He pulled back to the sounds of cheering, whooping and clapping coming from the aisles, and could just see Joyce Karen crying together out of the corner of his eyes, their arms wrapped around each other tight, both thrilled for their children, happy and together at last.

He tightened his hands on El's waist and spun her in a dizzying circle that had her giggling uncontrollably as she laid her head on his shoulder, squeezing her eyes shut as a wave of unbelievable happiness rushed through her.

They heard the click of Jonathan's camera and the cheers and clapping of their families but they didn't look away from each other, not yet, both wanting to drink in that moment until it was burned on their memories, never wanting to forget a second.

Mike settled El back on her feet, both their heads spinning dizzily, but they didn't care, deliriously happy as their eyes, both bright and glowing with happiness, met, beaming at each other.

'I can't believe this is real. Mike, you're my husband!' El squealed, her cheeks aching with her smile as she jumped up and down on the spot on her toes, wrapping her arms around his neck, giddiness bubbling up inside her.

Mike laughed, cupping her face in his hands as he leant down to press his forehead to hers.

'And you're my wife. Mrs. Wheeler,' he said thoughtfully, winking at her cheekily, 'It has a ring to it.'

El gaped at him for a second, before a smile somehow wider and brighter than before curved upwards at the corner of her lips.

'El Wheeler', she said, softly, pursing her lips in mock-thoughtful tone that matched his, before she flicked him a mischievous look, smirking slightly, 'I guess I could make it work.'

Mike narrowed his eyes at her, curling his hands around her waist playfully as she giggled before he leant down and caught her mouth with his. He laughed against her lips as she let out a startled gasp before melting against him, sighing happily as she rose up to burrow her fingers into his soft dark hair.

El kissed him back hungrily, smiling against his mouth as she heard their family wolf-whistling and teasing them loudly, her toes curling into the bare grass as something warm and distracting uncurled in her stomach, coming quickly to life.

She whined as he pulled back, holding on tighter for a second before reluctantly letting go, pouting up at him. Mike's smug smirk softened as he looked down at her adorable expression, leaning down to press a quick kiss to the very tip of her nose.

'I bet you can,' he teased back, eyes twinkling at her, his words soft and sure, warmth filling his chest as the pout melted off her face, her lips curving up into the half-smile that had first stolen his heart.

They turned as one then, their fingers tangling together and holding on tight, to smile at their ecstatic, cheering families, both ready to start the rest of their lives the way the fates had always intended. Together.

Notes for the Chapter:

> Ahhh I'm literally crying right now. What did everyone think? I can't wait to read your reviews!! Oh and by the way, I have another story in the works. I'm not sure when it'll be out as I might be getting a new job in the next few weeks but I can't wait till it's ready for you all. Love you. xoxoxo- Katie

Author's Note:

> So...what did everyone think? I can't wait to here back from you all xx- Katie
> P.S I am not entirely finished this story yet, so I will be posting a little slower than I usually do, but I will be working on chapters everyday and will hopefully be finished soon.